

By the same Author



INDIAN RAIN
DORA BEDDOE

WINIFRED BLAZEY

The Crouching Hill



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To

GLADYS MITCHELL

*who supplied the setting for this book and
suggested that it should be written as a detective
story*

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I

The Story Told by the Body



YOU MUST IMAGINE, IF YOU WILL, A CHURCH HALL. An inquest was held in it, not very long ago, upon the body of a woman of thirty. The body was lying in an ante-room used on Sundays as the place for the Lads' Bible Class. In the hall there were assembled forty or more people, excluding the coroner, the police, the witnesses, the Press, the St. John Ambulance Brigade (on duty in case the proceedings proved too much for those present) and a couple of strangers, both men.

The hall presented the bare, unattractive, badly distempered appearance common to such buildings, and, although the day happened to be Wednesday, it had its Sunday look because the ropes and gymnastic ladders of the Keep Fit class were still looped or tethered to the walls to keep them out of the way.

The benches, which ordinarily accommodated Sunday scholars, Band of Hope members, mothers in meeting, Old Folk having a free tea, the Ladies' Working Committee or the audience at concerts in aid of the Church Fund, held now merely those idle or curious or morbidly minded parishioners who had

leisure enough to show this amount of interest in the murder which had been committed at the *Rose and Thorn* inn on Gopple Hill on the previous Monday night or Tuesday morning.

The coroner was the squire, who lived a mile and threc furlongs from the Church hall. He was a florid man, good at hunting the fox, but not much good otherwise. He sat without a jury. The first witness was the doctor who had been called in by one of the dead woman's companions to look at the body. The coroner, who had also looked at the body, commenced by saying, "Yes, doctor, yes. Now tell us all about it."

At this unorthodox request the doctor looked slightly taken aback, and the inspector of police stepped forward and whispered in the coroner's ear.

"What?" said the coroner. "Oh, formal evidence of identification? Oh, yes, all right. Well, there's no dispute about who it is. I've put that down already. Now, come on, Menzies. Don't let's waste any time."

The large-faced, sharp-nosed doctor still hung fire, not because he objected to the manner in which the coroner had commenced his inquest, but because it had never been his practice, any more than it is the practice of most members of his profession, to tell any layman all about anything medical. However, he glanced sharply round the hall, nodded, and observed:

"I must tell you what I have learned in my examination of the body?"

"Yes, yes," replied the coroner. "What did she die of?"

"Suffocation and strangulation," said the doctor.

"Have you formed any opinion as to how she could have been suffocated?"

"Yes. I should imagine——"

"You mustn't imagine *here*, you know," said the coroner, making a brief note. "Now, what did happen?"

"I can't tell you. I wasn't there," replied the doctor. He had known the coroner since both of them, at the age of six, had attended a kindergarten kept by old Miss Rawbury, who, now deaf as a post, poor old thing, and existing only upon the Old Age Pension (although she always bravely gave out that she had private means, and, to uphold the lie, always drew her pension not at the village post-office, but at the neighbouring town of New Abbots, to which she was driven once a month in her nephew's car to see her sister, his mother), sat in the front row of the audience, and watched the mouths of her former pupils with intense pleasure and interest, although she could not make out what they were arguing about.

"Come, come, Menzies," said the coroner.

"Well," said the doctor, "all that I can say is that it appeared to me as though the woman had been smothered with her pillow, and——"

"One moment, please," said the coroner. "How many pillows were on the bed?"

"Two."

"Well, but how did the murderer—I should say," he amended, in some confusion (for it was scarcely the time to find his verdict), "wasn't the deceased lying on both the pillows?"

"If you please, sir," said a policeman, "there is evidence from another witness about the pillows."

"To be sure, yes, yes," said the coroner, slightly flustered. "Yes, well, never mind the pillows, Menzies. What about the strangling?"

"There are marks of fingers and a thumb . . ." began the doctor, and, in spite of the coroner's attempts to head him off, he proceeded to a discourse unintelligible to every one of his hearers and so teasingly inaudible to old Miss Rawbury that she hissed several times to her neighbour, Tom Kiddons, the poacher :

"What does Bobby Menzies say?"

Tom, who hated her because she was a good, kind old soul, and he was a good-for-nothing rascal, was at length compelled to answer, which he did by grunting :

"Dunno, ma'am," in a surly tone of acute nervous discomfort, and this silenced her.

"So she was first suffocated and then strangled," said the coroner, summing it all up. "Is that your considered opinion, doctor?"

The doctor said that it was. Then he added, to the immense gratification of everybody in the hall, including, this time, his former teacher, who caught the impressive word and repeated it in the loud tones which sometimes accompany deafness :

"I ought to say that when I conducted the post-mortem examination of the young woman I discovered that she was pregnant."

"Oh, really? How long?" enquired the coroner ; and then looked as though he thought the question might perhaps have been phrased somewhat

differently. However, as everybody wanted to know the answer, especially all the women, there was a rustle of renewed interest.

"About five months."

"Is there any chance," said the coroner, "that the woman could have taken her own life?"

"Never heard of folks suffocating themselves with pillows or strangling themselves neither," muttered the woman on the other side of old Miss Rawbury, unwisely.

"Eh? What's that?" Miss Rawbury demanded, looking eagerly towards her neighbour, and then at Tom Kiddons, who this time looked straight before him as though the woman had not spoken. His attitude was so uncompromising that after a minute Miss Rawbury gave him up, and looked again at the two men who had learnt their A B C in her little front room.

"It is in my opinion most improbable that the deceased took her own life, considering the means employed," replied the doctor.

"What about the possibility of accident?"

"I am not qualified to give an opinion about the possibility of accident. I have never heard of such an accident. That is all I can say."

"Very proper. Thank you, Doctor Menzies," observed the coroner, dismissing him. The doctor bowed and picked up his bag which he had deposited on the steps of the Sunday School dais. Suddenly the inspector of police hurried forward and anxiously whispered something in the coroner's ear. "Oh, heaven help me, yes," said the coroner, rather

upset. "Half a minute, Menzies. At what time do you say the death took place?"

The doctor returned to the platform, smiled slightly, put down his bag and replied :

"It is not possible to fix the exact time. It could have been any time between midnight and six o'clock in the morning."

"Anything else, inspector?" muttered the coroner. The reply to this being a slight shake of the head, the police witnesses were called.

"I was proceeding towards Elkley at eight-fifty ack emma on Monday," began the first, a village youth with a tall, strong body, a serious round face and a tuft of hair which stuck straight up from the middle of his head, "when I became aware of a female pursuing me with a view to conversation."

"Go on, you bad lad," said a friend from the back of the hall, and was immediately ordered out by the coroner.

"It appears," the young constable went on, "that she had come from the *Rose and Thorn* hotel and she wanted a policeman to return with her—to see a Body, this being the Body of this inquest. I returned with the female forthwith, and was proceeding up the stairs when I fell—slipped up, I should say—on the treads of the stairs, the same being brass-bound to a depth or width, as the case might be, of two and one-twelfth inches, on account of it being for commercials.

"Recovering myself, I continued to proceed up the stairs to the second floor. In Room Number Five a second female, not the one I was following,

was in bed. She was dead. I then telephoned to Sergeant Gristlewood and he . . ."

"That will do very nicely, Tom—er—constable," said the coroner. "We must have that part from Sergeant Gristlewood himself, a little later on."

"Very good, sir," agreed the constable, saluting.

"Now, constable, just one or two questions: Why did you not telephone your sergeant immediately, and both of you go together to the hotel?"

"The young female who waylaid—I should say accosted me . . ."

"You shouldn't," murmured the Press reporter of the *New Abbots Clarion*, who was scowled at by the coroner for so saying.

" . . . was in a—might I say dangerous state, sir?"

"You may, if that is what you mean, Tom."

"Well, sir, she was crying, and holding on to my sleeve and seemed all anyhow, like, so I thought it best to pacify her by going along with her. She was—seldom have I encountered a female more alarmed and despondent," the constable suddenly babbled, referring again to the note-book from which he had read, in a sing-song but otherwise expressionless tone, all the first part of his evidence.

"I see. Was the bedroom door open or shut when you arrived?"

"Well, sir, there was a regular huddle of ladies on the landing," answered the constable, again abandoning the note-book, "and when I had made my way past them and found the door shut I gave it a shove, but it didn't open, so I twisted the handle, but nothing doing, and just then along came Mr.

Herberd that keeps the pub—I should say the hotel——”

“Pub’s quite a good enough word for the *Rose and Thorn*, Tom, my boy,” murmured the landlord of that hostelry from the bench of witnesses, and was scowled at by the coroner.

“And Mr. Herberd opened the door with a key,” concluded the constable, “and so I was able to proceed inside and check up the body was a Body.”

“Very good. I think that’s all, then,” said the coroner. “Now, sergeant: you replied to the constable’s telephone message and arrived at the hotel”—he consulted his notes—“at . . .?”

“Ten o’clock, sir, being I had to get in touch with Inspector Jervis at New Abbots, him being supposed to let the chief constable, who lets the high sheriff, who lets the lord-licutnant know if any Bodies are about. These being as I understand it,” replied the sergeant, speaking with great rapidity, lucidity and economy.

“Well?”

“Yes, sir. I proceeded to the room of the deceased and found Constable Brownlow present, he having been careful—so he *said*,” broke off the sergeant, with not too cordial a glance at his elephant-footed subordinate—“not to deface, destroy, eradicate or erase any clues if it should happen to be what we think perhaps it was.”

“You mustn’t say that, sergeant. I shan’t put it down in my notes,” said the coroner sharply. “You’re putting a verdict into my mouth and that I will not have.”

“Very good, sir,” said the sergeant, in the

wooden tones which guard the dignity of all those in uniform who are found fault with unjustly by superiors.

"Yes, well, go on. What next?"

"I confirmed the opinion expressed by all others present," continued the sergeant with, this time, an unmistakable scowl at the constable, "the bedroom being full to overflowing with young ladies, the friends of the Body—I should say, the deceased—and rang up Inspector Jervis again, to find he was already on his way. It proving that no doctor had so far been fetched, I despatched Constable Brownlow for Doctor Menzies, and he examined the body as soon as I had cleared the room for him, with the result as specified."

The sergeant, who considered that he had shown the court, including the constable, how evidence should be given and the English language should be dealt with in public, stood back, and after the inspector had briefly corroborated the evidence given by his subordinates Miss Ursula French was called.

"I *shan't* ask her for formal identification of the body, Jervis, and leave it at that!" said the coroner loudly, in response to discreet interference from the inspector. "I don't care *what* the police want. I want to hear what some of these witnesses have to say. Damn it, we don't often have a murder!" So Miss Ursula French was called again.

This was a red-haired woman of twenty-eight to thirty, youthful and attractive in appearance until one realised that round her greenish eyes were networks of tiny lines and that the long creases from

the side of the nose down the rather lean face to the chin were the marks of sophistication, not of laughter. Her voice was thin, whining and high—the tones of the unsuccessful schoolmistress—and she fidgeted incessantly with a large ring which she wore on the middle finger of her right hand. She had a deceptive appearance of thinness; actually, although only slightly above the medium height, she weighed rather more than ten stone.

"Your name," said the coroner, "is Rhoda Ursula French?"

"Yes."

"And you are a schoolmistress?"

"Yes."

"You spent the night of Monday last at the *Rose and Thorn* hotel?"

"Yes."

"You shared a double room with the dead woman?"

"Yes."

"Single beds?"

"Yes."

"How far apart were they?"

"Oh, about—about seven or eight feet, I should think."

"Would you describe the bedroom as a large one?"

"Very large. That is, to me. I am not used to large rooms."

"Did you elect to share this room with the— with this Miss Francis?"

"Well, there wasn't much choice, actually."

"Explain that to me, please."

"Well, there were five of us, and the people said they could let us have two double rooms with twin beds and one single room. Well, Miss Mortimer, the oldest of us, seemed to have a right to the single room, we thought, and the rest of us just charged in."

"Do you mean that it was entirely fortuitous that you happened to share the room with the deceased—with Miss Francis?"

"Yes, it was quite accidental. I mean, it was immaterial to me who I shared with. We just had to share, and that was that."

As this part of the witness's evidence could be corroborated or discredited later, the coroner pressed the point no further, although (for he was not altogether a fool) it interested him very much. He was, after all, a fox-hunter. He glanced at her out of his bright blue eyes, and said peremptorily :

"Now, Miss French, what about Monday night?"

"I don't know what you mean, quite."

"When did you go to bed?"

"Well, before midnight, anyhow."

"Half-past eleven?"

"About that."

"Now, did you hear anything during the night?"

"Not that I remember. I mean, nothing to wake me up. I do remember thinking I heard it raining."

"But it didn't rain at all on Monday night. It was a very fine night."

"Yes."

"But you thought you heard rain?"

"Yes, but I didn't properly wake up."

"So you don't even know what the time was when you thought you heard this sound?"

"No. I've no idea."

"Now, a very important point, please, Miss French. What made you realise that Miss Francis was dead? Before the police sent out for the doctor, I mean?"

"I don't know. I suppose—— Oh, I see! Oh, but I wasn't the person who discovered she was dead. It was Miss Smithers shrieking out that made me look at her."

"You mustn't rush information at me like this. Now wait a bit. Miss Smithers? Miss Smithers didn't sleep in the room, did she? I understood you to say——"

"Yes, that's right. Only, you see, in climbing on a chair to draw back the curtains on Tuesday morning I sort of tumbled, and brought the curtain and the fixings and everything down with me. It made a good deal of noise, and Miss Plimmon and Miss Smithers rushed in——"

"Rushed in? But don't I understand from——" he searched his notes "——from the police witnesses that the doors of the hotel are self-locking?"

"I don't know about that," said the witness. "I hardly ever stay at hotels. But I do know they rushed in when they heard me fall, because Miss Plimmon said——"

"You mustn't tell me what Miss Plimmon said," said the coroner sternly, vague memories of murder trials floating importantly through his mind. "So Miss Plimmon was the first to discover that Miss Francis was dead. Is that it? But I thought you said——"

"Yes, I did. It was Miss Smithers. Miss Plimmon came and picked me up and unwound me from the curtain; and Miss Smithers said—I really don't see how I'm to tell you this part," said the witness, perplexed, "if I can't repeat what anybody said. It was all saying. I mean, Miss Smithers said that Marion—that's Miss Francis—was dead asleep, and then she went to pull the bedclothes off her face and wake her up, and then she screamed, and Miss Plimmon and I went and had a look—and—well, that's how we knew."

"You say you are a schoolmistress, Miss French?"

"Yes."

"And Miss Francis was at the same school?"

"Yes."

"What is the name of the school?"

"Rowton Road Senior Non-Selective for Girls."

"Non-Selective?"

"Yes," said the witness; adding with justifiable bitterness, "After the junior schools have got the scholarship children and the free-place holders off to the secondary schools, and the central school has had the pick of the rest, what's left comes to us."

"I see. And Miss Smithers was also a teacher at this school?"

"Yes."

"Miss Plimmon?"

"No. She is a voluntary social worker."

"And Miss Mortimer?"

"She's a voluntary worker, too. She's on the Education Committee. She really came down with the Guides."

"Did you know either or both these ladies before you came here on this holiday?"

"It isn't a holiday for us," said the witness angrily. "We're giving up our holiday, or part of it, to bring these kids—children—away for a fortnight."

"Yes, yes," said the coroner soothingly. "Very creditable indeed. But please answer my question."

"No, I didn't know either of them, really, but I knew Miss Mortimer by sight."

"Do you happen to know whether Miss Francis knew either of them?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I shouldn't think she did, except Miss Mortimer by sight."

"What makes you say that she probably didn't know them?"

"Well, she didn't greet them as though she knew them when we were first co-opted for this job."

"I see. Who was last into the bedroom on Monday night—you or Miss Francis?"

"I can't remember. Oh, yes. After we were ready for bed—in fact, I was actually lying down—Miss Francis said she had left her toothbrush and paste in the bathroom and would go along and get them."

"And she went?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I didn't take much notice. I had turned my face towards the window because the gas was popping and flickering and got on my nerves, and I don't really think I bothered any further except to tell her to turn out the light before she got into bed, as there weren't any bed-head switches, not being electricity, you see."

"And did she turn out the light?"

"I suppose so, as it wasn't on in the morning when I woke."

"Do you know of anybody who had a grudge against Miss Francis?"

The inspector almost danced in agony at this question, but the witness calmly replied:

"No. But, as I told the inspector when he asked me, I didn't know her out of school hours at all. We just happened to be on the same staff."

"Thank you, Miss French. You have been most clear. Just one more question. How long have you been on the staff at——" here he referred to his notes again "—at your present school?"

"Five years."

"And Miss Francis?"

"About—let's see. She came last Easter twelve-month. That would make it just under eighteen months."

"Hm! I suppose all the teachers are women?"

"Yes, except Mr. Walter, who is lent us by the boys' department for science."

"Oh?"

"We lend them Miss Phillips for music in exchange."

"We may have to get in touch with Mr. Walter," said the coroner, looking at the police inspector for confirmation of this, and receiving a wooden stare. "Did he know the dead woman?"

"Well, at school. That's all I can answer for. But perhaps I ought to say," said the witness, "that Mr. Walter is fresh out of college—I mean, he's just completed his first year of teaching. I

shouldn't think he could be concerned in anything that happened to Miss Francis."

"I see," said the coroner. "Well, I think you have answered all the questions I have to put to you, Miss French. We will just take the other ladies in corroboration," he continued, raising his eyebrows at the inspector as though to enquire whether, in the inspector's opinion, the inquest was proceeding on right lines. The inspector, who had been very restive, not to say anxious and fidgety, for some time, nodded gloomily, and Miss Smithers and Miss Plimmon were called in turn. Their evidence corroborated what Miss French had said, and nothing of any importance was added by the landlord, who, asked whether his self-locking bedroom doors really were self-locking, replied: "Well, what do you think, with commercials and all their samples?" The inspector at this point went up to the coroner and conferred with him. The audience, although it held its breath, could not catch what passed between them, but fortunately for its peace of mind it was to be immediately enlightened.

"The inspector wishes the enquiry to be adjourned pending further investigation on the part of the police," announced the coroner. "Therefore I shall not find my verdict to-day, although there doesn't seem much doubt what it will be."

With this unorthodox, improper and ill-considered (although reasonable) remark, he got up, looked at his watch, and hurried out of the Church Hall and along a narrow alley bounded by an iron fence to his car, and his chauffeur drove him immedi-

ately, and without instructions, to the saloon bar of the *King George IV* in Juke Street, a more pretentious public house than the one in which Miss Francis had been murdered. It was at the opposite end of the town, too, was three-star in the A.A. book, and, moreover, as the coroner noticed for the first time, it had no brass-edged treads upon the stairs.

II

The Story Told by the Room-Mate

★

(1)

THE FUNERAL WAS WELL ATTENDED AND, SUCH WAS local gratitude for a sensation of some magnitude—the last recorded murder having taken place, according to parish records, in 1806, when one Abraham Bowley had been struck dead by one Jeremiah Toler for saying that Boney was no fool, and now we had lost Nelson where were we?—flowers were heaped upon the coffin and about one-fifth of the total population of the village followed the *cortège* to the church. On the following Sunday the vicar preached on ‘Ye know not at what hour,’ and everybody thought about the murder, which may or may not have been in his mind when he composed his sermon.

Meanwhile, vexatious and outstanding problems with regard to the Children’s Country Holiday had been solved (more or less) and the helpers had just settled themselves in the billets to which their own choice or some other agency had directed them, when the calm was shattered by an exhaustive police enquiry led and sponsored by the inspector himself.

The inspector was an earnest and yet imaginative man of forty-two, satisfied with the position he had gained for himself, not unduly ambitious, but, like nearly all provincial police officers, very willing to show Scotland Yard that the local men could track down a murderer without assistance, in spite of the fact that local coroners did their utmost to queer the pitch. This mixed metaphor was his own. As the dead woman had been a Londoner, the inspector had informed his wife—who thought her husband overworked himself, for they were a devoted couple—that he supposed The Yard would barge themselves in. So far they had not done so, and he was grateful for this, and put it down partly to the fact that the case had attracted comparatively little interest in the newspapers, and partly that the chief constable was on holiday and probably did not even know that a murder had been committed in his district.

"But, mark you, my dear, I think it'll hot up," he observed. "What's more, it's my belief there's a lot more to be got out of those women than Sir Wallingford managed to get."

"And you could get it, Henry," said his wife.

"There's that red-haired one, now. I wouldn't trust her an inch. And she's got the strength, you know. And in that room all night with her alone. Of course, you've got to find a motive, but that shouldn't be hard with women that have been seeing each other day by day for about the last year and a half. Although, mind you, I'm not casting any aspersions. Doesn't do to jump ahead of your evidence, you know."

"Of course not, Henry," said his wife, looking

fondly at him. "Although I should have thought it more of a man's crime, myself. And didn't you say the poor thing was expecting a baby?"

"There *was* that," the inspector agreed. "It widens the field a goodish bit. There's that young fellow they called Walter, a teacher in the Boys' at their school. Miss French—the red-haired one—was very quick to speak up on his behalf, but—I don't know, I'm sure."

"There was Patrick Mahon," said the inspector's wife, putting more hot water into the teapot. "It might be that kind of case."

"Yes, but what I've got to find out first, it seems to me," said the inspector, "is why that bedroom door was left open. You see, people do naturally shut their bedroom doors, 'specially in strange houses, and particularly in hotels, because of their money and things."

"Not to speak of drunk men blundering into the wrong room in the dark. I shall never forget our experience at Llandudno," said his wife, "and, after all, we hadn't got to bed then, or else the door would have been shut."

"Yes," said her husband, for some reason rather doubtfully. "Well, until I can get hold of this Mr. Walter I reckon I'll have a go at these ladies and see what else I can get them to say. I *did* take a list of their addresses, and I'll tackle the red-haired one first."

Miss French was not surprised to see the inspector. A voracious reader of detective stories (which, incidentally, she wrote in her leisure time with what energy her young charges were pleased to allow

her to retain at the end of each trying day), she realised full well that an adjourned inquest could only mean one thing.

The inspector was always pleasant to ladies—the word ‘women’ was not in his vocabulary; those of the sex who could not by him be classed as ladies were grouped under the heading ‘females’ or lumped together—with those of the baser sex—as persons. Females, in his mind, left cars unattended in places where it was forbidden to park; took dogs off leads in public gardens; drove to the danger of the public; (these last were usually superscribed ‘young females’); but ‘persons’ fought with one another or with their husbands; were found begging in the street; were taken up drunk and disorderly in the otherwise respectable town of New Abbots; shop-lifted; were run in for ‘language’ or obstruction of a policeman in the execution of his duty. To the committing of grosser or less forgivable sins New Abbots had little tendency, a fact for which the inspector thanked his stars, for he was a decent, kindly man, knowing little of vice and pleased to discover that it did not sufficiently presume upon a slight acquaintanceship to introduce itself into his district, where it certainly was not wanted.

“Miss French?” said Miss French’s landlady.
“I’ll see if she’s in.”

“You needn’t trouble,” said the inspector.
“She’s in all right. I saw her from the street. Say it’s Inspector Jervis from New Abbots.”

Miss French was wearing a peacock-blue *négligée* and had her hair curling all over her head. She was pretty, the inspector decided, a fact which

put him on his guard. She got up when he came in, and welcomed him, although not gushingly.

"You want some more of the dope, I suppose?" she said. The inspector cautiously agreed, and added that he would be glad if she would tell him all about everything which led up to the Tuesday morning on which Miss Francis had been found dead in bed.

"Murdered in bed," said Miss French. "We needn't mince our words. I know that word hasn't been used, but you saw what she looked like, inspector, the same as we did, and no one could have any doubt. Of course, I can't think now why it didn't wake me up. The only thing is—were we drugged?"

This was not a new thought so far as the inspector was concerned. Indeed, he had considered it very carefully, for it was not in thrillers only that such things had been known to occur.

"Drugged?" he said. "A very interesting idea, Miss French. And I dare say something in it. Whatever else, my theory is that the deed was premeditated all right. That being so, the murderer wouldn't exactly want to wake you up in the middle of the proceedings. Now then, miss; go ahead. You just give me all you know, and I'll sort out the bits that matter. We can't get much out of what you said at the inquest, but that wasn't your fault, of course. I take it you and this Miss Francis always got on all right?"

"Well, as I explained at the inquest, inspector, we hardly had anything to do with each other outside our job, you know."

"I appreciate that, Miss French. But what I'm anxious to establish, miss, is the, as it were, geography and history of the crime. For murder it was, as you say, although we had to ask the coroner for a postponement. Don't quote me as saying that, by the way, please. It wouldn't hardly do, but you and I can put two and two together."

"Well, yes. It wasn't suicide, and one can't see how it could be accident," Miss French agreed, "in spite of what the coroner said to the doctor. Her eyes met those of the inspector and she grinned. "Now, inspector, where do you want me to begin?"

"I don't know, without you begin with telling me all about this holiday for the children. I kind of gathered," said the inspector delicately, "that you weren't altogether pleased to be giving up your holiday to bring these children to the country."

"You said a mouthful," Miss French observed, offering the inspector a cigarette. He declined, on the grounds of being a pipe-smoker, and she lit a cigarette for herself and puffed heartily and unscientifically at it whilst she talked. "You see, it was like this: Our school collected a lot of money some time ago for this country holiday fund, and the head and the head assistant—very friendly—lived together, and all that—used to take the children away for a fortnight every year. Then the head retired, and the head assistant wanted to spend all the holidays with her at Dawlish where they've bought a cottage or something, and that left the new head to carry on, or else to drop the whole scheme. Well, I don't know whether you know much about school staffs——"

The inspector said that he had met a good many teachers, but always out of school hours.

"Well, perhaps you can imagine"—she gave him a doubtful glance—"the sort of pressure that's brought to bear on one. I don't quite know how to describe it . . . anyhow, the point is that the new head said she couldn't drop the scheme with all that money attached, so we all agreed to see the thing through in turn, with the assistance of voluntary help. This year it came to Miss Francis, Miss Smithers and myself. I was particularly fed up about it as I had a particularly decent invitation to go to the Lakes. Still, *noblesse oblige*, so here I am."

"I see. Yes, that's very clear, miss. Now perhaps you wouldn't mind giving me a very exact account of the day you came down with the children, and then of the evening and night, up to when you discovered Miss Francis was dead in her bed."

"But it would be far too long a story. What is it you particularly want to know?"

"That I can't say, Miss French. That's why I suggest you tell me all about it. No doubt I shall get some pointers which will show me which way to get to work, and it can't be too long a tale for me, miss. We are very interested in these holiday kiddies down here."

"Oh, very well. Don't blame me if you die of boredom before I'm through, that's all. What do I do? Begin with where I got up in the morning, or what?"

"That would be excellent, miss," replied the inspector, taking out note-book and pencil.

" Oh—well—I got up at a quarter to seven and got ready. We were going to meet the children at the Mission Hall, about twenty minutes further on the bus than where I get off to go to school. I was fairly early—we had arranged to be there by ten, and the buses to take the children to the station were to start at eleven. The train was to leave our local main-line station at twelve. All clear, so far? . . . Well, I had to shove through a crowd of mothers at the gate, and I remember one woman saying: ' Coming crushing through here when we want to see our children off to the country ! ' I felt like saying that if it weren't for me and people like me, their beastly children wouldn't be going to the country, but you can't have rows in the street. I hate some of our parents, though. It's no wonder the kids are such a mess, unlucky little devils.

" The others were all there by the time I arrived, except Miss Smithers, and we started sorting out and collecting up the children. Then we lined them up and checked over the names. Then we led them into the Mission Hall and labelled them and their baggage and checked the names again. Then we sat them down and started the lavatory queue. It took quite a time to get that finished with. Then we checked the names again and talked to the children a bit, and made a few rules and regulations because of collecting them up at the other end of the journey, and then we laid down the law about eating and a few things, and then we went down the lines and collected all the bottles of drink they had brought, and by that time it was a quarter to eleven, so we lined them up again, in a long crocodile this time,

all round the hall, in twos, and led them out on to the pavement.

"The buses came up a bit before time, and that got us to the station so early that there we had to wait for nearly half an hour. We sat in the buses for this."

"How many buses were there?" enquired the inspector.

"Two. We had seventy-five children, fifteen to each helper. Miss Plimmon, Miss Francis and Miss Smithers were on one bus, Miss Mortimer and I on the other."

"Did anybody come to see the helpers off?"

"Yes, Miss Plimmon, Miss Smithers and Miss Francis each had a friend——"

"Male?"

"Only Miss Plimmon, and I think really it was her brother. The others were female."

"Did anybody come to see you off?"

"Good Lord, no! I can't abide being seen off at stations. I had rather expected my brother to turn up, as a matter of fact. He was going to lend me his racquet."

"Could you describe Miss Francis's friend?"

"I didn't notice particularly, except that she had her hair done up. That's so unusual nowadays you'd be bound to notice it, I should think."

"How old was she?"

"About my age, or a bit older. Wore a pair of linen slacks and an orange blouse—that sort. Carried a shopping basket. Obviously wasn't one of us."

"One of you, Miss French?"

"Not a teacher."

"Oh?"

"You can always spot the profession, I don't know why it is. We try to disguise it nowadays, but it's like being a negro or a cripple or something. There's nothing much you can actually do about it."

"No, I suppose not—— That is, please go on, Miss French. Did anything happen on the train?"

"Oh, yes, several things, but not any good to your investigation. At least, I shouldn't think so. We left right on time, and went slowly. I had a corner seat, facing the engine, the non-corridor side. Lifted some child out of it. Dirty trick, but we're like the officers who have to travel first—we must keep our end up by always proving to the kids how damned important we are. For the first hour the kids were terribly unnaturally good. Never ate, never moved, hardly spoke. Then we told them they could have their lunch. That was the end of all the good behaviour, naturally. That is why we had kept them grubless for as long as ever we could. They ate and ate, stodging through sandwiches, sausage rolls, biscuits with cheese, cake, oranges, chocolate, barley-sugar—well, if you've ever seen children eating on a train you can imagine it. And crumbs and paper and muck all over the place, which we had to get cleared up afterwards.

"Then, right in the middle of nowhere, the train stopped. We stuck there, all among fields and things, for about twenty minutes, and then the guard worked his way along the train to our carriage and found out what it was."

"Communication cord, I suppose, little devils?" said the inspector, humanly smiling.

"Not little devils. Best of intentions, apparently."

"I don't get it, Miss French."

"Neither did the guard at first, until we reassured him. We'd laid down the law pretty firmly, you see, as they were going to billets and not into camp for the holiday, about pulling the chain and so on, and one of our bright specimens couldn't see any other chain to pull when she 'went' on the train. That was all."

"Did the train stop long enough for anybody to have boarded it, Miss French, do you think?"

"Yes. Twenty minutes, I tell you. Can't think why the guard didn't make a bee-line for our carriage—any *teacher* would have done—but he went methodically all along the train, and it was full, of course, as is usual in the holiday season. Our carriage had been reserved. Otherwise we'd never have been able to squash the offspring in. As it was, it was a tight fit, I can tell you."

"Well, we got out at New Abbots, as I expect you know, and came on here in private cars. I must say that all the people were awfully decent, but although we knew that there would be enough billets for all the children we didn't know what arrangements had been made, and when we arrived we found, of course, that nothing had been arranged at all except a jolly good tea."

"That was in the hall where we had the inquest," said the inspector nodding. Miss French shuddered and then said suddenly:

"Let's have a drink, inspector. It's nearly

eleven o'clock." She produced sherry and a tin of biscuits. Then she took two glasses from the side-board cupboard, wiped them upon what the inspector was compelled to admit was a clean handkerchief and poured out the wine.

"I understand," said the inspector, considerably aided in his remarks by this evidence that Miss French was, at any rate, not a teetotalter, "that you had a drink or so on the night of your arrival?"

"All in good time, inspector," Miss French replied. "I haven't got to opening time yet. We'd just arrived and were being given tea, if you remember."

The inspector agreed that he did remember, but suggested, diffidently, that perhaps she could cut a bit out.

"Well, I could, of course. I warned you you'd be bored. I could give you the whole thing in a nutshell," Miss French retorted. "I thought it was detail you were after."

"Rather later detail," the inspector suggested.

"Righty-oh," responded the lady, taking a gulp of sherry which made the inspector feel sick. "To cut the cackle, then, during and after tea the inhabitants came in and inspected the children and a sort of snatch-and-grab raid began. At last we got even the most unlikely specimens off our hands, and were thinking about trying to find a little home-from-home for ourselves—it was then about eight o'clock in the evening—when we had a nasty shock because the really nice little clergyman or minister or whatever he was, came up and said would we mind going along to the school-

room now, because the doctor had to see the children before they could actually be allowed to go home with their holiday fathers and mothers.

"Well, speaking only for myself, but I daresay the others felt the same, it was like receiving a death sentence, being as how we were about dead-beat by this time. However, we went. We had to walk, and it was pretty dark, and our only guide was a small Boy Scout named Stanley. Still, he knew the way, and we got to the second hall by twenty-five past eight. Thank goodness the weather was fine.

"Well, the second hall is a good deal smaller than the one we went into first, and it was one squashed mass of child. Some were crying, some chi-yiking, the place stank like a charnel house, and one or two kids were asleep. It had been a bit of a day of it for them as well as for us. Then we discovered that each child had to see not only the doctor, but a lodgings official as well.

"Well, the people who had agreed to billet the children fought it out with the vicar, who seemed to be a sort of buffer between them and the lodgings official, and we sat limp, fed-up and boiled alive, in the front row. Francis and Smithers were arguing about leaving the local people to make a night of it and us hopping off to a hotel and buckling in to in the morning, and I must say I was all for it——"

"One moment, Miss French," said the inspector. "Which way did the argument go? I mean, was it Miss Francis or Miss Smithers who was in favour of going off to the hotel?"

"Oh, Smithers, definitely. Francis was far too

conscientious to think of walking out on a job before she had seen it through. Not that we were doing anything, mind you. For all the use we were we might just as well have gone. That was my contribution to the discussion, but Miss Plimmon and Miss Mortimer thought we ought to stick it out, so, as it was three to two, we sat and stewed until the last howling kid had been hauled off and the vicar came up and asked us whether we had fixed up anything for ourselves.

“ ‘Chance would have been a fine thing,’ said Smithers, who is young and a bit crude. The vicar looked a bit perturbed and said that we were welcome to sleep in the hall if we liked, or we could have the floor of the vicarage dining-room, but he was afraid that to give us beds was out of the question.

“ ‘Well, we could have died. Then Smithers got up and said :

“ ‘ ‘I’m off to the *Rose and Thorn*. You others can do as you like.’ And off she walked, at that, to find out how to get to the blighted hostelry.

“ ‘Well, she dug up some decrepit man with a horse-drawn vehicle of sorts, and he engaged to drive us to the *Rose and Thorn* for one and threepence.

“ ‘ ‘Threepence each,’ said Smithers. ‘Come on. Who says?’

“ ‘The vicar had fizzled off by this time, and we, and a couple of men who were waiting to lock up the place and put the lights out, were the only occupants. So we followed Smithers out to this tumbril thing she’d discovered, and, rather to my surprise, I must say, eventually we arrived at the

Rose and Thorn. Do I still go on? Or do you know all the next part? It all came out at the inquest, don't you remember?"

"I remember," said the inspector. "But it comes fresher, the way you tell it, miss. You are quite the *raconteuse*."

"Well, I ought to be. I write novels in such spare time as the Lord supplies," said Miss French, with a burst of confidence.

"Make money, miss?"

"Oh—thirty pounds a year, perhaps, if I'm lucky. No, I do it for love of it, inspector. There's really nothing mercenary about me." She grinned again.

"I see, miss. Please go on."

"Yes, all right. Where was I?—Oh, I know. On the doorstep of the *Rose and Thorn*. Francis betted they wouldn't take us in at that time of night. Pity they did, I should say. But that old cat Mortimer said she believed they had to, or else they would lose their licence, so in we went."

"I should like all this part of the narrative in great detail, if you would, Miss French. It's very important, all this *Rose and Thorn* part, as you'll readily understand."

"Just as you say. Although I can't help feeling that everything germane came out at the inquest, you know."

"If you please, miss."

"Well, up to this point Miss Mortimer, as the senior member of the party, had taken the lead."

"Meaning the initiative, miss?"

"Yes, that's the idea. But when we had charged

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up the steps of what we imagined to be the saloon bar, she shoved me in front of her and said: 'You do this. You've got more cheek than I have.'"

"Haven't I met Miss Mortimer?" said the inspector, fogged by this casual rendering of what he could not believe to have been Miss Mortimer's words. The red-haired woman laughed, looked at his glass, which was still four-fifths full, and filled up her own.

"I don't remember her exact words, if that's what you mean. Does it matter? What it amounted to was that she didn't know a thing about pubs and thought perhaps I did. Just shows what sort of reputation you can get for yourself by offering your friends a couple of nasty cocktails out of a five-and-sixpenny bottle instead of giving them a cup of gritty coffec, doesn't it?"

"Her exact words don't matter at all," said the inspector. "It was only that I couldn't reconcile what you said with what I'd gathered of Miss Mortimer."

"You'd have to be pretty fresh to gather anything of Miss Mortimer, I should have thought," observed the victim of this interrogation. "But there, you police! Including the rosy-faced constable at the inquest. I think you ought to warn that lad that practically everything he says is capable of just that *double entendre* which can be so embarrassing in the breach-of-promise court—whatever the official name for that is."

"Yes, yes," said the inspector patiently. "And so you went first into the *Rose and Thorn*?"

"Oh, sorry, sorry. You get used to talking in our job. Yes, well——"

"You know, miss," interrupted the inspector, giving vent to a feeling which had been troubling him for some time, "you don't, if I may say so, exactly line up with my idea of a teacher."

"Well, I'm only one by accident, you know. I was really cut out for higher things, but the money didn't run to them in our family, so I let myself be sent to college because, after all, even a quarter of an education is better than nothing, and after that it was all over bar paying back to the local education committee the hundred quid or so it had advanced me to pay my fees. So I had to teach, and somehow, although I paid the money—heaven knows how—in the first five years, I've got stuck in the job. It's like being in a leper colony or keeping bees—once you've started you keep on. Besides, after five years I doubt whether you'd be capable of holding down any other job."

"Yes, yes," said the inspector patiently.

"Oh, of course. The *Rose and Thorn*. Well, in we trooped, and were rounded up before we'd more than crossed the mat by a largish woman in black and a girl of about fifteen. Poked in the back by Miss Mortimer and stamped on in a marked manner by Smithers, who was nearly dying of hunger, in spite of her hearty tea at the Church Hall, I suggested that we might be accommodated.

"Inspector, that woman and girl worked wonders! It was only a pub, really, yet they dug up fillet steak and chipped potatoes, biscuits and cheese, coffee, bread and butter, within the space

of time it took us to get ourselves sorted out among the bedrooms and to have a wash."

"This bedroom arrangement, miss," said the inspector. "I didn't quite get it at the inquest. You shared with Miss Francis, Miss Smithers and Miss Plimmon shared next door and Miss Mortimer, as the oldest lady, had the single room. Wasn't that it? How far away was the single room from the others?"

"Well, it's an old house, inspector, as I suppose you know, and the second-floor passage has a kind of dog's-leg in it. The single room was away to the right from us, but exactly where I couldn't tell you."

"So Miss Mortimer heard nothing either?"

"Well, she said at the time she'd heard nothing, and really I don't see how she could have heard much, considering what the rest of us heard."

"Yes," said the inspector, who had now come to the crux of the matter. "That seems to me very curious, miss, you know."

"I do know," said the red-haired woman, "but if you'll hold your horses half a second, inspector, maybe you'll get another angle on the situation."

"Something you refrained from giving the coroner, miss, do you mean?"

"You're dern tooting I refrained from giving it to the coroner," said the lady vigorously. "Do you think I want the local education committee eyeing me askance when I get back, and queering my pitch when I come to obtain that coveted place on the short list for the next headship?"

"Oh?" said the inspector, a wealth of under-

standing in his tones. "You ladies were, if I may use the expression, tiddly when you went to bed that night."

"Not the expression at all that I should have chosen," objected Miss French. "Pickled, yes; tiddly, no. You're thinking of charwomen, not respectable members of the upper lower classes like us."

The inspector made a note, and looked at her with a notably lack-lustre eye. His big shot had recoiled on him. He had expected he knew not what, but this simple revealing statement that the ladies (as he still called them in his own mind) had not been perfectly sober when they went to bed that night explained so much, and yet was no help, so far as he could see, in unravelling the mystery of the murder.

Miss French apparently guessed his thoughts, for she said :

"I could describe the orgies, inspector, but I doubt whether it would help you much if I did. You see, we began with sherry, went on to gin and vermouth, had beer with the food, and topped up with a peculiarly raw and nauseating brandy. I might explain that we helped each other up the stairs, and that Smithers slipped twice on the brass-work—very neatly—I shot downstairs myself like a ton of coals next morning—and we practically had to carry her to the bathroom in which, I regret to say, she was quite fairly bad before we could get her to bed."

There was what Miss French herself might have described as a quite fairly long silence at the ter-

mination of this frank ingenuous statement. Then the inspector rose heavily, put the band on to his note-book and held out his hand.

"Much obliged for your statement, Miss French. Very useful. Apologise for troubling you, but it's just a routine duty, as you know."

Miss French saw him out, and then returned and poured herself another glass of sherry.

(2)

Meanwhile those who had welcomed the children to the country and were prepared to house, feed and entertain them, were carrying on with their good work (which, definitely, in this case, must have been its own reward, since the children were unappreciative, it was reported, of all that was being done to give them a happy, healthy holiday) and, filling up all those little rifts within the lute which, it appears, are inseparable from charitable endeavours, the helpers worked harder still.

Miss Mortimer, perhaps, worked hardest and bore the brunt of the fray, although it was Miss Plimmon who stood like some tubby, earnest, rather odd-looking little buffer between the steam-engine tactics of the local ladies and the resistant stationary mass of the children's prejudices.

Miss Mortimer had received a fourth share in her father's business, and had contrived to live very comfortably since she had done so. For more than a dozen years she had been a lady of leisure, and was inclined to patronise and occasionally attempt to browbeat all those who had to work for a wage or a salary. At the age of fifty-three (some eight

years before the murder) she had had a serious illness, during which she had 'promised God', as the Irish have it, to devote herself to good works if she were allowed to recover.

Providence, with what can only be described as a misplaced sense either of humour or optimism, had decreed that she should regain complete health and strength, and Miss Mortimer had fastened herself upon the local Girl Guide company, like some particularly determined and ruthless octopus, and had attempted (without success, so resilient and matter-of-fact are the modern young) to strangle the life out of it.

At the age of sixty she had become capable of tying knots in a piece of string and of naming them correctly. She learnt the morse code and how to semaphore with two rather dirty little flags. She wore the hat, the tie, the brooch, the brown leather gauntlet gloves, the white lanyard and sensible shoes of an officer in the movement, and ran whist drives, concerts and garden-parties at her house or in the Church Hall to raise funds for the annual camping holiday.

She even went to camp herself one never-to-be-forgotten summer. It was a very wet August, and the camp was at the bottom of a hill. She caught cold, developed rheumatism and spent the whole of the winter recuperating. For some reason known only to herself (for the Guide captain, with kindly common sense, had done her utmost to dissuade her from the project) she blamed the camping out, and consequently the Guides, for what she always referred to thereafter as 'my trouble.'

Exactly what her trouble was, nobody ever knew, but it appeared to be secret, exacting and tyrannical. It was also extremely convenient, as it prevented her from taking up any duties which did not appeal to her, or which did not bring her into that major portion of the limelight which she had come to regard as her due.

That the Guide funds of which she was treasurer, and, it must be admitted, chief source of supply, should be devoted to paying the railway fares and something towards the holiday board and lodging of some of the company so that they could accompany her to the country and help to look after fifty poor children from the local school, was her idea entirely. The scheme itself she had carried through almost unaided, for the Guide captain preferred to go to camp as usual, and the only other officer said that she had promised her mother to take her to Devonshire one summer, and in view of her mother's advancing years she really thought, if nobody minded, that this would have to be the year.

The Guide captain, the question of camp apart, had resolutely refused to have anything to do with the scheme. She was a secondary school teacher, and she admitted frankly, but (being subject to the Guide Law) in comparatively mild terms considering what she could have said on the subject had she been able to give full vent to her feelings, that she had had quite enough to do with children and billets during the war to last her for the rest of her life. So another woman, Miss Plimmon, vaguely referred to by Miss Mortimer as a 'social worker,' had been co-opted, and, beaming vague optimism

and scattering vaguer counsel, accompanied the party on the appointed day. Three teachers, Miss French, who had had so many rows with the head that term that it was regarded on the staff as a safe bet that she would be pressed into service without much hope of being able to refuse the allotted task, Miss Smithers, the youngest member of the staff and therefore, by popular consent and understanding, quite unable for the present to call her soul her own (particularly as she had only just completed her probationary year of service, and did not know how the head was proposing to report on it), and Miss Francis, such a dark horse that everybody suspected her of that kind of purple past which presupposes a readiness to oblige the powers that be in case they should be inclined to dig up the past and take a dislike to the colour of it, had also come on the fortnight's holiday, it being understood that they were responsible for the behaviour of the school children. The other twenty-five young helpers were the Girl Guides themselves, mostly from the county secondary school. Their headmistress, however, had had nothing to do with the scheme. Her girls went as Guides, not as pupils, she said. How glad she was afterwards, she said. It would never have done for county school girls to be mixed up with a murder. Girl Guides, presumably, could be mixed up with what they pleased. Girl Guiding was an Out of School Activity.

The morning on which the inspector paid his special visit to Miss French saw the other four helpers variously employed. After strenuous efforts on the part of Miss Mortimer (who puffed and

panted from house to house clad in full Guide regalia, complete with murderous-looking knife in real leather sheath and having a real stag-horn handle), rather tentative, apologetic bleatings on the part of Miss Smithers (poor child), considerable (and, one must admit, wearying) *sotto voce* blasphemy on the part of Miss French herself and a great deal of earnest waste of effort on the part of Miss Plimmon, the children had been billeted, re-billeted and, in some cases, billeted all over again, to secure for them that happy holiday environment referred to so often and so irritatingly by His Majesty's Inspector of Schools as 'perfect cohesion between child and home.'

"Like chewing-gum on the bottom of an ink-well," said Miss French. "A pity," she added to Miss Smithers, who, away from her job, was a pleasant, tactless, dependable sort of girl, "that it couldn't have been Miss Plimmon to be murdered instead of Miss Francis."

"Miss Plimmon and the Board both fuss," observed Miss Smithers.

However, Miss Plimmon had her place and filled it. Not only did she act in her own person as a buffer state, but she it was who gave all the news of the murder to the townspeople and told them exactly where and how the newspapers had got the story wrong. She dealt with reporters so faithfully and so fully that even those human cormorants were able to retire, gorged to bursting-point, with the information they had sought.

The point that had troubled the coroner and the inspector was also worrying the helpers. Miss

Smithers, in her blunt way, put the question abruptly to the inspector when she met him coming down the steps of the house at the end of his interview with Miss French.

"Look here," she said, "I don't know whether it struck you, and I liked Miss Francis and I do want to see the beast punished who did that—see what I mean? Well, I mean, what *about* that open door? You know, the fact that the Plimmon and I were able to barge in like that when we heard Miss French falling down all among the curtains and so forth? See what I mean?"

"Yes, miss," said the inspector. "In fact, if you've time to spare, I wish you'd let me have your account of what happened that night and morning."

"I say," said Miss Smithers, "that would be rather good. I mean, I've got quite a lot I could tell you, I daresay. Being on the staff and all that, you know."

The inspector glanced at her curiously. He knew little of girls of twenty-one. His wife had been thirty when he married her, and he had had no sisters and had been educated in the monastic hot-bed of boys' schools, elementary and secondary. Could it be, he wondered, that she proposed to spill the beans? And did she really know what beans to spill?

He took in her youthful face, her clear eyes, earnest and trusting, and mentally shook his head.

"Well, miss," he said, in a reserved manner which she found chilly and rather threatening, "that's very helpful, I should say. Do you object to making your statement at the station?"

“ The station ? Oh, you mean the police station ? No, I mean, I don't mind. Why should I ? After all, I didn't do it, you know.”

So prattling, she was assisted by the inspector into his car, which was not outside the door, but round the bend of the street, and was driven away down the slope.

III

The Story Told by the Good Companions

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(1)

TO MISS SMITHERS' NAÏVE AND INNOCENT SURPRISE, the police station—in this case the house of the local constable—was filled to overflowing. Miss Mortimer and Miss Plimmon both were in the little front room which overlooked a pleasant, long, front garden whose gate opened on to the street.

The ladies greeted one another nervously. Sensing the tension, the inspector became very genial, and, in the end, turned out Miss Plimmon and Miss Mortimer to wander up and down the garden path discussing the various flowers with the constable, who had grown them mostly from seed and was very, very pleased to show them off. Then he settled Miss Smithers in a chair with her back to the light, so that he could bully her, if necessary, by letting her see the full ferocity of his glances if anything she said did not happen to fit his theories about the murder, leaned towards her, his hands between his knees, and began.

"Now, then, Miss Smithers," he said.

"Well, what exactly—I mean?" said Miss Smithers, turning upon him a face as round and

honest as a harvest moon. "I mean, I'd do anything to help, naturally, but naturally I haven't the vaguest——"

"Of course not," said the inspector. "All I want, Miss Smithers, if you don't mind, is a clear, straightforward account of how you happened to come down here at all, and exactly what happened during and after the journey. Can you give me that? It would clear up matters if you could."

Useful, too, to compare her version with that of Miss French, he thought.

"Oh, yes, of course. Well, but, I mean, where do I begin?" she enquired, with youthful eagerness.

"You begin, Miss Smithers, with what brought you down here at all," said the inspector, taking out, but not in any terrifying manner, his note-book.

"Oh, that? Well, I mean, that's easy enough. It was about a month ago—yes, a fortnight before the end of the term. My class—do you know what schools are like, inspector?"

The inspector admitted, cautiously, that he had attended schools in his youth.

"Yes, well, I mean, we've got one of those heads, you know—perhaps you don't have them in boys' schools," pursued Miss Smithers bravely. "You know, that get all the examinations and things finished a fortnight before the end of the term, and then you're left stranded for ten ghastly days with the little blighters with nothing on earth to do. You've got through the syllabus—or not, as the case may be—but you can't go on trying to cram anything into their heads because they know as well as you do that the beastly, rotten, sickening examina-

tions are over, and that all the papers have to be marked, and not the tears," she observed, incorrectly and, to the inspector's mind, somewhat incoherently, "wash out a word of it, I mean, and they're jolly well not going to do a single other thing, chance what."

"What?" said the inspector, poising his pencil.

"Yes, that's what I mean," explained the voluntary-involuntary witness in confusion. "I mean, they're just simply not having any, and where are you? Well, just at the height of the rumpus—kids generally cavorting and what not—in walks the head and suggests in a sort of sweet-acid manner (she's thirty-seven, which I really do call a too devastating age in heads, although, mind you, I adore her in some ways), that perhaps I should like the privilege of taking the darlings (Satan bust the buttons off their boots!) to the country for a fortnight, and she was sure the Committee would look kindly upon all good little teachers who didn't mind giving up a fortnight of the summer holiday to take them there.

"Well, I mean, what could I say? So I said I should be pleased, so that had to be that, and I was left wondering just how I should break it to the parents, because, of course, I have to live in digs during term, and they do rather count on having me at home for the holidays, or all to go away together, or something. I mean, after all, they did send me to college, and so forth, with some sort of struggle. Money, I mean, and all that."

"Yes, I see, miss," said the inspector. "And so the day came."

Miss Smithers, who, apparently, had a good deal more to say before the time came to describe the morning of departure, merely added :

" Well, what I mean, you can't very well stick it out at the end of your first year, can you ? Especially when an inspector has already asked the head, and she's passed it on, whether you really think you have chosen the right vocation. *Vocation !* "

At this point words seemed to fail her, and the inspector was moved to observe :

" Profession, I understood, miss. And then, at last, the day came when——"

" Yes, of course it did. At least, I mean, it nearly didn't for me, because the head had had a row with Miss Mortimer and, to work it off, came to me and suggested that I should send in my name for a Course instead of going on the holiday with the kids."

" A Course ? " enquired the inspector.

" Oh, yes, *you* know. You go and stay a week in one of the colleges at Oxford or Cambridge, or sometimes in Leeds or Wales, and get uplift about the profession or vocation, and so on. Well, I sent in my name, because I still didn't know whether she'd reported on my probationary year or not, and didn't want to put a foot wrong, in case she hadn't, so when she told me how good the Course would be, and how much money I should save, and how much I should enjoy it (not half !) and how much pleasure it would give herself and the Education Committee to think of young teachers taking so much interest in their work, and being enthusiastic enough about their profession, to give up a fortnight of the summer holiday to go to a Course, well, of course, I gave in

again, and sent in my name. You've really no idea of the various kinds of pressure they can put on you to get you to do what they want. But the Course didn't come off, as it was full already, and I'd applied too late, and, anyhow, she'd more or less made up her row with Miss Mortimer, so, as my family had fixed up without me for their holiday, I had to come here after all. And now this murder has to happen!"

The inspector commiserated with her, and then led her back to the subject. This time his patience was rewarded.

"Oh, yes, of course. Well, funnily enough, I began the day in a way I hardly ever do—I had a bilious attack. Whether it was being so fed-up and not really wanting to go, or whether it was something that didn't agree with me, I'm sure I couldn't say, but there it was, and I really thought, at first, I shouldn't be in time for the train. I felt pretty rotten too." She paused, reviewing her sad state. The inspector did not give her much time for this, however, but, tapping his pencil very gently on his note-book, said cheerfully :

"But you *didn't* lose the train by it, miss?"

"Oh, no, of course not. But I didn't feel really well all day, and when bedtime came—but you'll want to know about all the daytime first, I suppose. I mean, things lead to things, sort of, don't they? I mean, people don't just suddenly do a thing like a murder, do they? I mean, there must be clues."

"Clues?" said the inspector, looking wooden. "How do you mean, miss—clues?"

"Well," said Miss Smithers, with sudden and surprising acumen, "I mean, the whole point, as I

see it, was that open bedroom door. I mean, the Plimmon and I were able to charge in headlong, and, after all, one feels bound to realise that the doors *were* self-locking, and that nobody but a fool or hopelessly tight, I mean, would leave the door ajar in a strange hotel all night. And, according to Miss French's evidence, neither of them had been out of the room, did you notice? After the incident of the toothbrush, I mean."

"That door *is* the crux of the matter, as you've explained. And that's why I think I'd better get your story complete, miss," said the inspector. "Acting (I may tell you in confidence) on our advice, the coroner did not put too much emphasis, miss."

"Of course, I mean, I couldn't hazard a single guess who did it, but that door seems fishy to me," concluded Miss Smithers; and having thus endorsed an opinion which the inspector had held since the beginning of the enquiry, she resumed her account of the day.

"I got there late," she continued, "as I was saying; that wretched bilious attack. The consequence was that the mob were already climbing on to the buses when I arrived, so, seizing the opportunity, I started shoving kids upstairs and inside with all the force I could muster, trusting to luck that the boss would be among those present to witness my frightful zeal and that my non-arrival at the call-over hadn't been noticed. Anyway, it turned out she'd had another row with the Mortimer and hadn't turned up, so as soon as I thought I'd got more or less my fifteen I climbed in myself, dispossessed a couple of kids of a front seat inside, took one of

them back again, and sat there trying to look as though I'd clocked in at about half-past eight, as I'd spotted the boss in her two-seater. I suppose she couldn't leave us alone. Anyway, I mean, you've got to keep your end up somehow, haven't you? And in our job excess of zeal always seems to get a good mark, tiresome as it might be anywhere else."

The inspector agreed, and made a note. "Anything special happen during the journey, miss?" he ventured.

"No, I don't think so. The children were quite good at first, but——"

"Hotted up after lunch. Yes. I had that much from Miss French, miss. Anything else you noticed?"

"No, I don't think so. Oh, yes. We stopped when——"

"A child pulled the communication cord supposing it to be the lavatory chain, miss. Yes, I've got that, too. Anything else did you notice?"

"No, I don't think so. Oh, yes. We stopped at some place or other, I don't remember where, and people on the platform served the children out cups of milk and buns. Oh, and we—the helpers, I mean—got out of the train and had cups of tea. Of course, it was quite——"

"One minute, miss. How long did you wait while this tea and buns were served out?"

"Oh, twenty minutes, I should think. They uncoupled the engine and put on another more willing one, or something. I mean, we had some reason for stopping, apart from the milk and buns.

Personally, I thought the tea was made with soda, so I only drank half mine, but the others said they enjoyed it, and I might have thought more of it if I hadn't been sick that morning. Oh, and hadn't had to go tearing back for that beastly voucher for Miss Hubbard—that's the head."

"And no other stops at all, miss?" the inspector inexorably enquired. He was bored by Miss Smithers' insistence upon her bilious attack.

"No, I don't think so. Of course, some of the way we simply crawled, but we didn't, I should say, ever drop below thirty even then."

"So anybody could have boarded the train at Snapshott—I think that's where you would have stopped, miss—and no questions asked, I presume."

"Oh, I see. I mean, you're on to that Baby Business," observed Miss Smithers with another of her disconcerting flashes. It was not reasonable, the inspector decided, that one so obviously lacking in brain-power should be capable of these flights of pure intelligence. "But hasn't it occurred to you, inspector," she continued, "that that's a motive which might very easily wash out?"

"How do you mean, miss?" The inspector was all attention. Miss Smithers might not be able to grip a class of girls, but she certainly gripped his interest.

"Well, you know we get the sack if we marry? A rotten swindle, I call it. Still, there it is, and you enter the profession on those terms. Well, Miss Francis was—well, she *was*, wasn't she? I mean, the inquest——"

"Settled that point, miss. Yes, it did. Accord-

ing to the medical evidence, there's no doubt Miss Francis——"

"Was due to spring a baby on an unsuspecting world. Well, I mean, she may have been married, you know. And if she was, bang goes your idea of the motive, doesn't it?"

She gazed at him, a youthful and ridiculously irritating female Socrates, and the inspector, with a groan, wrote another note.

"I mean," pursued Miss Smithers, anxious that the inspector should get the point, "the profession——"

"Asks for it, yes, I can see that, miss. I must say I'm obliged to you. I hadn't considered the possibility of a legal relationship between Miss Francis and the father of the——"

"Embryo. No," said Miss Smithers, cutting in. "But there's a distinct possibility, you know. I mean, if you'd *known* Miss Francis—like we did, I mean, being on the same staff with her and all that—I don't really think you'd think of her as having an affair of that kind. I always sensed a husband in the background, long before it came out about the baby; and, after all, I mean, a lot of it must go on, although one seldom hears of it. I mean, we're all human, aren't we? Whatever the Education Committees might choose to think. And, after all, why teach us all about instincts, at college, I mean, if we're not to have any of our own?"

"I should find it valuable to get an idea of Miss Francis as she appeared to the rest of her colleagues," said the inspector, refusing to debate the last point.

"That's not what you mean at all," responded the young lady, with another of her astute thrusts. "You're as sick as mud to think she might, after all, not have been murdered because she was going to have a baby. It was a lovely motive. I mean, it's been done so often, and all that. But, honestly, inspector, I don't believe in this case it will wash. I mean, you can't say to people: 'Marry, and you lose your job,' without something breaking out somewhere or other, can you? It isn't natural. I'd like to see them saying it to *men*," she concluded, with a harsh, youthful laugh of sardonic disgust and disapprobation.

"Well, it's not the same thing," the inspector weakly rejoined.

"Oh, but it is, you know. Often and often. I mean, I know two women—they're not teachers, certainly—who have to support their husbands and children. Of course, it's not so bad in industry. You men at least live your sex-life openly, and nobody cares a toss as long as you can do your job all right. Even in the Civil Service—and surely that's how it ought to be!" she concluded, gazing with wide-open, challenging eyes at the inspector. He made haste to agree, having neither stomach for, nor interest in, the argument, and then said swiftly, before she could return to the attack:

"I should be glad to have any exact information you could give me, miss, about Miss Francis, all the same."

"Oh, well, first of all, she was above the average, I'd say, at her job. You may think I'm no judge, only just done my first year (and made a pretty

fair hash of it, I might tell you, only I think the boss will indent for me because she's got nobody else she can shove the P.T. on to, so far as I can see), but it's not so long since I was at school myself, and I know what we should have thought of these people had they been our mistresses at the County. Miss Francis was always at school when the rest of us arrived, and although she wasn't a bit priggish or stand-offish you always felt that she could have been a head, and ought to have been. She was awfully decent, too, when I first got there. Tipped me off about all the boss's little fads and fancies, warned me we weren't expected to smoke on the building, not even in the staff-room, and advised me, at the end of a handwork lesson, to see the kids picked up the bits, because otherwise it annoyed the caretaker, who was the only person on the building who really mattered—and a whole lot of really useful little tips like that. Oh, and never to let any complaint about kids thieving or writing on the lavatory walls be sent to Miss Hubbard, because she never could manage to find out who did it, and it made her mad to have to try. And then the parents would all come up and swear she'd dropped on the wrong kid, and all that. Ever so decent and useful."

"And were all the staff treated the same by her, do you know?" enquired the inspector. But her quick wits, which he was beginning to respect, prompted Miss Smithers to reply:

"You don't get me discussing staff relationships, inspector. I'd be bound to give a wrong impression. All staff-rooms are hotbeds, not to say battle-fields.

There's always a fair amount of stink—that's the hotbed side of it—and the alliances are nearly always changing—that's the battle-field."

"Miss French, then," said the inspector, ignoring what he regarded as flights of fancy on the part of the young lady, "didn't begin to be as helpful as Miss Francis?"

"Miss French," replied Miss Smithers vigorously, "is a cat. A clever cat, mind you," she added, with all the generosity of the young.

"I see," said the inspector. "Now, Miss Smithers, you seem, if I may say so, as sensible young lady, with your head screwed on the right way——"

"You won't blarney me into yea or nay like that, you know," said Miss Smithers.

"By no means, miss. And shouldn't try. I only meant that I trust you to let no word of this conversation of ours go further."

"Oh, I see. Oh, well, I mean, I don't usually go blabbing things all about. Although I should have thought it would be the other way about. I mean, don't *you* go shouting it as my opinion that Miss Francis was genuinely married, and the baby the product of lawful wedlock, as it were. I mean, it wouldn't do me any good in my job if some of my opinions got about from an authoritative source like you."

"Believe me, miss," said the inspector earnestly, "if there is anything in this idea of yours that the deceased—I should say Miss Francis—might have been legally married, I shall certainly not go noising it abroad. After all, as you pointed out just now, if the motive was not the unwanted baby and all that,

we've got to look elsewhere than to the father of that baby for our murderer. I admit I thought we were on to a pretty soft thing, but if it wasn't the child's father, it complicates things to a considerable extent, and we'll have to revise our ideas."

"Won't the husband come forward, shouldn't you think? I mean, it's not a very nice thing for him to have people think his wife was seduced or something, and not a wife at all. I mean——"

The inspector, who was old-fashioned enough not to care for the word 'seduced' on the tongue of a girl of twenty-one, broke in hastily, fearing to be treated to an extension of her vocabulary :

"Quite, miss, certainly. Well, I'll be seeing the other ladies, I hope. Not that I'll get much there, they not knowing Miss Francis, I suppose, except so far as this holiday business was concerned."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said Miss Smithers. "I don't think Miss Plimmon knew her, but Miss Mortimer must have done. She only came off the Education Committee last year, and she's still a big noise in the borough."

"Miss Mortimer used to be on the Education Committee?" said the inspector.

"Yes. She was on when Miss Francis was appointed, because I heard Miss Francis saying so once in the staff-room. She was talking to Mr. Walter, and she said, sort of joking but serious, I mean : ' I should sign up as a scoutmaster, Wallie, my dear, if I were you. I could have got a whole lot farther in this job if I'd been willing to put on a blue felt hat and a whistle, and offer to learn to tie

knots in a bit of string.' And then they discussed Miss Mortimer."

"Miss Mortimer wasn't popular, then, as an educational force?" said the inspector with heavy humour.

"She was *not*. Silly old bean! And she's not popular with her own Guides down here, either. In fact, they laugh at her. She's got some awfully decent girls down here to help. They really are trumps with our rather frightful specimens. I like them awfully. And they've been ever so decent and good over all this murder business. I mean, they've shut up about it, and shut our kids up, and taken them out when we haven't been able to, and organised entertainments and games—— I'm jolly well going to write to their head when we get back. At least, I would," she added gloomily, "if I didn't think the Mortimer would collar all the credit, and I would if I didn't know the French would take it out of me afterwards for what she'd consider beastly cheek. I wonder how many years you have to do at this job before you can definitely consider yourself *not* a toad under the harrow?"

As the inspector could not answer this question, and since it was, in any case, rhetorical, he produced cigarettes, offered one to the young lady, and then observed:

"And you can't help me any further about that self-locking door?"

"The door that didn't shut!" said Miss Smithers, spoiling the drama of this exclamation by a fit of coughing as she inhaled tobacco smoke. She shook her head, being bereft of words for the moment, and,

when she could, added solemnly : " You see, the trouble is that you can't prove which of them left it open. If it was French it was rather sinister, and if it was Francis herself, it was a lot more sinister still."

At this candid exposition of a worrying problem the inspector scratched his head.

" I think perhaps I'd better see the other ladies now," he observed. " Don't hang about if you want to go out or anything, miss. I can always see you again later on, if I don't to-day."

" Toodle-pip, then," replied the young lady. " I've promised to take some brats over Hallington Common. And I hope I've cooked your goose all right, you beast," she thought, spotting Miss French, who was coming down the road towards the house.

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" Well, exactly as to that, inspector, I don't really know," said Miss Plimmon, with her usual smiling expression. It would be easier, thought the inspector, if she could stop smiling just for a little while, but it seemed unlikely that she would. And her little hitches and jerks were really most trying. He tried being sharp with her, for the smile, patient man though he was, was a serious annoyance.

" But surely, miss, you must know whether the train stopped or not on the journey down ? "

Then, feeling that his irritation was unjustifiable, since, if she pleaded ignorance of the answers to his questions, he was bound to believe that she really did not know, he added, much more gently :

" You see, miss, perhaps I'd better explain our

little difficulties. The first is this : Low Abbots, that's this village, is not a large place. The police know everybody in it. There's no connection between any of the inhabitants and this lady that got herself murdered. Therefore we're looking for a stranger."

"Well," said Miss Plimmon, widening the smile just a little. ('Damn it,' thought the inspector, 'she's exactly like a Sunday School teacher we used to have, who, the worse the kids carried on, the more he smiled to try and cover it up. And then went and drowned himself later on, but not because of us kids and our Sunday School doings. Something behind the smile. What trouble is she in? What's she have to be foxy about?') For the drowned Sunday School teacher, it was discovered, had led a somewhat curious life, the details of which were a little too unsavoury even for the Sunday papers.) He watched the smile closely, no longer irritated, and connected it with the jerking head, and the curious moppings and mowings. Miss Plimmon was a case, in his expression.

"Well, miss?" he said, encouragingly, as she did not immediately continue. She looked vaguely at him, recollected herself and begged his pardon.

"I was going to say that I quite understand what you mean, inspector," she said. "And, after all, it is only right, I suppose, that you should suspect us all, as we came down with poor Miss What's-her-name. What *was* her name? My memory is most unsatisfactory."

"Francis, miss. And I don't mean at all that I suspect you ladies. Naturally I've got to ask you questions, because you can be much more help than

anybody else at present. Now the point about the train stopping is this : So far as we know, nobody but your party of ladies and children got out at New Abbots at all. In fact, miss, if you recollect, the train was specially stopped for your benefit, or so the railway station tells me. The train you came on doesn't normally stop at that station. You can see for yourself by the time-table if the point hasn't reached your notice."

"Oh, I *see*." She really would split her face, thought the inspector, fascinated, if she tried to smile any wider. What on earth was she so much afraid of? The smile was a grin of fear, there was no doubt about it at all. She was apologising for existing. Barmy, poor old girl. Still, it led to breaches of the peace. They usually ended up by making scenes in the street, or in buses and trains, and shouting obscenities, and generally being a nuisance until they were put away ; or got themselves run over. He'd known several cases like that. People were apt to go mad in the lee of the great green hills around Low Abbots, Abbotwell and New Abbots. Quercy country. He could feel it. He had Welsh blood on his mother's side, and it crept, especially these times, towards the fall of the year, when he contemplated the hills, great, watchful beasts, crouching on hidden haunches, and seeming to breathe and threaten. He remembered the valleys of his boyhood, open and lovely, even with the black of the pits, along their little rivers, making smoke and grime on the land that should have been green. But the valleys there were kind, and the mountains above and beyond the sloped green hills were beauti-

ful. But here, in this heathen village, where, instead of six chapels and sixteen public houses, there was just the one church and three inns ; where the river ran slow and deep between pollarded willows, and where the hills seemed to watch, not to guard, the people who lived in the place, there seemed to be a loathsome understanding. The landscape understood the men, but did not love them. He found himself wondering whether, had she gone to some other locality, the dead woman still might be alive, although all the circumstances, which had led (he supposed) to the murder, should not have been altered.

He looked at Miss Plimmon again. Afraid to interrupt his reverie, she was still sitting there and smiling. He pulled himself together.

"Of course, if you can't tell me anything, miss, you can't," he said, feeling self-conscious in the face of that wide, insane, propitiatory grimace.

"But I didn't say I couldn't tell you anything." To his horror she got up and came sidling round the table. She leaned on the stout deal boards, and, with a horrible air of leering coquetry, observed : "I could tell you a *very great deal*."

"Then please do, miss," he said, making great play with his note-book and pencil to hide the misgivings he felt at this horrid propinquity. He drew his chair away, and, as though the gesture had been a clear-cut command, she almost scuttled round the table again and seated herself in her place.

"When I say I do not know whether the train stopped or not, inspector, I am, of course, forgetting the very kind people who gave us the buns and milk."

"I thought you might be," said the inspector drily. "Now, miss, think again."

The smile faded just a little as she turned her eyes sideways in thought. Then she brightened up.

"No, it's no good, inspector. I could *imagine* it stopped a dozen times, but really I don't remember. You see, unless I am *deliberately* wakened up—which happened at the buns-and-milk station, but even there, you see, I can't recollect its name—I always sleep in the train. If I don't, I finish my journey *quite prostrate*."

"I see, miss." The inspector made a note.

"And all that I say will be used in evidence against me!" said Miss Plimmon, with a return of the manner to which the inspector most seriously objected.

"No need to be playful about it, miss," he said. "After all, it's a murder I'm investigating. And," he added, disregarding the little squeak of dismay that she paid as tribute to the rebuke, "we never say 'against you.' At least, if we do, we shouldn't ought. Now, miss, you said there were things you could tell me. Out with them, please. My time's brief."

"Well," said Miss Plimmon, looking backwards (it seemed over both shoulders at once, so far apart and protuberant were her eyes) and then regarding him again and smiling more than ever, "didn't you see those *men* in court at the inquest?"

"I did see a couple of men, and both have been checked up on, miss," said the inspector. "One was the poor lady's father—him having been sent for, very thoughtfully, by Miss French—and the other

was the sister's husband, come to support his father-in-law, and a very decent young fellow, too, he was."

"He was no sister's husband," said Miss Plimmon, bending forward and hissing the words. "At least, he may be that as well, but *that's the man who got Miss Francis into all the trouble.*"

She sat back, smiling (like a thrush that's eaten a very large worm, thought the inspector). His face apparently expressed his disgust, for she leaned towards him again across the table and said, in a sickly tone :

"Of course, this is just for *your ear*. I *never* speak ill of the dead."

"Of course not," agreed the inspector. "Now, see here, Miss Plimmon, you'll realise, no doubt, that what you've told me is remarkably important in view of what happened to Miss Francis."

"Of course. *Motive*," said Miss Plimmon, with gleaming eyes.

"Exactly. Unless, of course," the inspector continued, eyeing her, "we can prove that she was actually married."

"*Married!* But that's impossible, inspector! She couldn't possibly have been married to him! How could she?"

"Well, it may be knowledge to you, miss, but the teaching profession isn't allowed to marry—the ladies, anyhow. And my theory is," said the inspector, unblushingly appropriating Miss Smithers' ideas for his own, "that Miss Francis may have been legally married, and legally an expectant mother, all the time. In which case, don't you see——"

"Well, anyway," said Miss Plimmon, "I *can*

tell you this, inspector. Neither of those men in court got on to our train, because I know for a fact they came down here in a car."

"That's interesting, miss. May I enquire how you know?"

"Why, certainly. I saw them going back in it. And as the younger man was driving, I don't suppose it was a hired car. Therefore they came down in it. That's all."

"Yes, we can check up on that. Did you happen to notice the number?"

"Of course, inspector." She produced a little diary and handed it over. Under the appropriate date was the number of the car, and written underneath were the words:

'Murderer leaves Low Abbots. "I will repay," saith the Lord.'

"I am afraid you've been a bit previous there, miss," observed the inspector. "No right to jump to conclusions like that, you haven't."

Miss Plimmon accepted the diary and this second rebuke, and then said:

"Can I go now?"

"No, not yet, miss. I'm sorry. But we really have hardly started. I would like you to give me an account of the arrival of the party here in Low Abbots, and the night you spent at the *Rose and Thorn*, if you don't mind."

"The night at the *Rose and Thorn*, inspector? But I don't know that I can say any more than was said at the inquest."

"But you were only asked one question at the inquest, miss, if you remember."

"But there was everybody else's evidence. I meant I couldn't add anything to that."

"Perhaps I don't need that you should, miss. What I'm after now, if you follow me, is not so much direct and actual witnessing, so to say, as what you might call the once-over."

"The——?"

"The once-over, miss," repeated the inspector firmly. "The inside stuff. The——"

"Oh, the—don't they call it the dope? The psychology of it all, I think you mean."

"Suit yourself, miss," said the inspector. "No frills, though. Just a straightforward account."

"Well, the first thing that struck me as funny," commenced Miss Plimmon, "was the way Miss Mortimer gave way."

"Gave way? Broke down, do you mean, miss?"

"Oh, no. Gave up the leadership of the party. You see, although I yield to no one in the whole of our borough in respect and admiration of Miss Mortimer, she is *not* always easy to get on with. I have known several people to be—not exactly afraid of her—please don't think that, inspector. That would put an entirely wrong complexion on what I am trying to say—but, well, they felt that they were not always treated quite fairly—quite *scrupulously*—by Miss Mortimer. Well, as I was saying, she had control of the whole of our party—although the teachers were perhaps what the apostle—I *think* it is the apostle—calls a little stiff-necked about her attitude—and there had been *quite a word or two* between her and Miss—I always forget that red-

haired woman's name—between the two of them, first on the bus and then on the station."

"Not on the train, miss?"

"No. They were in different compartments with their children, and Miss Mortimer and I had the Guides."

"And you slept, miss?"

"During most of the journey."

"Miss Mortimer wasn't what you might call talkative, eh?"

"I don't know at all. I composed my mind, said my little personal prayer (without which I never go to sleep in a train lest there should be an accident and I be killed and suddenly have to face my Maker)——"

"I had an aunt like that," interrupted the inspector excusably. "Only with *her* it was a clean pair of—it was always clean underclothing, miss."

"Very proper," said the lady, eyeing him with some bale. "Am I to go on? Or not?"

"Let us get back to the *Rose and Thorn*, miss, then, if it's all the same to you. You were saying that Miss Mortimer gave place to Miss French, and that it surprised you."

"Yes, it did. Besides, she almost gave the impression that she intended to let us all know that Miss French frequented such places, for, after all, inspector, you may call the *Rose and Thorn* an hotel, but it is nothing much more than a pub."

"True, miss. And then?"

"We went in, and were kept hanging about in a very draughty little passage until the woman of the place and a not very spruce-looking girl came up

and tried to persuade us to take our custom elsewhere. Still, they weren't full. That they had to admit, for Miss Mortimer suddenly ousted Miss French and took charge again herself, which was an arrangement which I, for one, preferred.

"Well, after some wrangling and objections on the part of the woman and the girl, some forceful remarks from Miss Mortimer and some vulgar asides from Miss French, we came to an agreement for supper, bed and breakfast.

"The supper appeared—I will say that for it—immediately. It was not the sort of thing to which one is accustomed, but it sufficed. Miss French, I am sorry to say, appeared in what I can only suppose are her *true colours*. She treated us all to a glass of sherry—most unnecessary and extravagant, in *my* opinion, but, of course, I have to make do on so very little——"

"You don't go out to work, then, miss, I take it?" said the inspector, who disliked her more heartily every minute.

"My father was a lieutenant-colonel," stated Miss Plimmon. The inspector was not impressed by this. He merely observed:

"This is interesting, miss. It bears out what two other witnesses have told me. You ladies all went to bed tiddly."

"Went to bed *what*?" said Miss Plimmon.

"Tiddly, miss," said the inspector, a man of firm character.

"Well, speaking for Miss French and Miss Francis," said Miss Plimmon, letting him have his own way, "I wouldn't disagree with you, inspector.

In the first place, they both had the sherry. That was before the meal began. The landlord—a rather gross man——”

“A great friend of mine,” said the inspector, very firmly indeed. “A large-hearted, good-natured chap if ever there was one is good old Joe Herberd, of the *Rose and Thorn* hotel, miss.”

“Really? Oh, well, then—where was I?”

“Sherry, miss.”

“Oh, ycs. The landlord brought the tray up himself, and observed that we were the girls of the Old Brigade—an unnecessary observation, surely?”

“Oh, no; a compliment, miss.”

“Oh? Well, we drank the sherry, and then Miss French inadviscdly asked for cocktails—only she called them mixed drinks—and then for beer.”

“Inadviscdly, miss?”

“Well,” said Miss Plimmon, with the anguished expression of a public speaker who is being not only unfairly but succssfully heckled, “that is *my* opinion. She invited the landlord to join her. Upon this Miss Francis also ordered beer, and the landlord rang the bell.”

“Upon this,” said the inspector, “the landlord’s son-in-law brought up the beer, and——”

“Yes, and the wretched girl—Miss French, of course, I should say—asked the landlord and this other young fellow to join them.”

“Which they did,” said the inspector heartily, “and then beers were brought up by *young* Joe. Upon which——”

“The misguided girl—I refer, of course, to Miss

French—said : ‘ Do I ask this gentleman to join us ? ’ ”

“ Which he did,” said the inspector enjoyably. “ Oh—by the way, Miss Plimmon—did the two girls drink neck and neck with those men ? ”

“ Neck and neck, inspector ? ”

“ Pardon. I don’t mean cheek by jowl. I mean, how many beers did Miss French and Miss Francis put away altogether ? Did you notice ? ”

“ No. I retired to bed.”

“ Oh ? You were the first to go, then ? ”

“ I wished to clean my teeth in comparative privacy. There was only one bathroom, so far as I could discover.”

“ I see, miss. So you’d gone to bye-bye, I take it, by the time the others came upstairs ? ”

“ Well, I might have done, inspector, except for the man with the cough.”

“ The man with the cough ? ”

“ You look quite intelligent, inspector,” said Miss Plimmon, getting some of her own back.

“ You mean you heard someone coughing in the night, miss ? ”

“ What else ? A most dreadful noise. Horribly disturbing. Although Miss Smithers appeared to observe nothing of it. *Not* a very sensitive girl.”

“ May I ask how long you remained awake, miss ? ”

“ I can’t really tell you. All I know is that I retired at ten-forty-five, and was in bed by five past eleven. I could not sleep because of this person with the cough, and then Miss Smithers came up and said she felt extremely ill and added : ‘ French and

Francis have got to the stage of having brandy, which means French can't drink any more beer, so I think the evening has almost come to an end.' She then asked me whether I had anything to give her to eat. I had nothing, so she got into bed, without, I believe, having either cleaned her teeth or said her prayers."

"And then, miss?"

"Then what?"

"Yes, what, miss?"

"I really can't tell you, inspector. In the morning I heard a horrible noise—somebody falling off a chair next door—and I rushed in, accompanied by Miss Smithers, to find Miss French in a heap among the bedroom curtains. Of course, I went straightway to her assistance."

"Ah, yes," said the inspector. "Now, miss, I'd like to take you very carefully here. You see, if you *really* didn't sleep, you should be a most valuable witness. In fact, you're the sort of person I've been looking for. Now, miss, tell me this first, if it's all the same to you: if you were awake, as you say, how came you didn't hear the murder?"

Miss Plimmon looked astonished, as well she might.

"Well, really, inspector," she said reasonably (and without a trace of the smile), "I don't quite see what you mean. I don't know, for one thing, whether the murderer made any sound—or whether that poor unfortunate woman made any sound either. And, what's more, as I haven't the slightest idea as to when the murder took place, except at any time during the night, according to the doctor, I don't really see that you can expect me to——"

"It was only to make sure you *hadn't* heard anything, miss. I thought if I asked you it might perhaps bring something back to your mind as it were. But——"

"Wait just a moment, inspector," said Miss Plimmon. She began to look slightly alarmed. "You are not by any chance, suggesting that I might have murdered Miss Francis?"

"You, miss?" The inspector looked taken aback. "Certainly not."

"Can I have that in writing?"

"No, miss. Now, come along. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing, inspector, except that I *do* remember someone came out of that room at just after midnight."

"I can't accept that as an uncorroborated statement, miss."

"Why not?"

"Far too important. Look what it might imply. Now if you could find somebody else who'd heard the same thing, and could get them to come to me and declare it—see what I mean, miss, don't you?"

"Yes, I see that you don't believe me," said Miss Plimmon. "Well, suppose I told you——" she leaned towards him again and lowered her voice—"suppose I told you that I knew I could get corroboration for the story? Would that satisfy you?"

"It would help us, miss," the inspector tactfully replied. "Who would be your witness? I ought to get in an interview as soon as I can."

"Well, I *know* Miss Smithers heard it," Miss Plimmon replied, "because she raised herself on

her elbow and said : 'What's that?' And I replied, so far as I can remember, that it was probably Miss French or Miss Francis feeling sick and going along to the—going along."

"Why should you suppose they felt sick, miss?"

"Why, inspector, have you forgotten what I told you about the drinks?"

"By no means, miss. I must speak to the landlord about those. I can't really imagine that he would allow two respectable ladies to go to bed drunk. Tiddly, that's one thing——"

Miss Plimmon flinched at the repetition of the word. The inspector, who had paused to observe its effect, made a note, at which her eyes grew round and threatened to drop out altogether, so very protuberant and glassy did they become. Then he finished, kindly :

"But drunk is quite another, and Joe has the credit of his establishment very much at heart, miss."

He then regarded Miss Plimmon so gravely that she was moved to say weakly :

"Well, perhaps they weren't used to it, you know."

"Now, miss," said the inspector, "you can't have it both ways. You were at some pains just now to tell me that both of them *were* used to it—too much so, in your view, I gathered."

"Well, at any rate," said Miss Plimmon.

"Leaving aside the question of what happened in the night, then, miss," pursued the inspector, betraying at this juncture a sudden cheerfulness which Miss Plimmon found disconcerting, "I'd be

glad of a very detailed account of what happened first thing in the morning."

"You had better ask me questions, then," responded the witness, considerably flustered, "and then I shall be sure to say what's right."

"A very good idea, miss. Well, now, what woke you that morning?"

"My alarm clock, of course."

"Oh?" It was the inspector's turn to be non-plussed. He stared at her incredulously for a moment. Then his face cleared. "Oh, your alarm clock, miss. Not the fall?"

"Certainly not the fall, inspector. I was fully dressed when we heard Miss French come tumbling down, along with the curtains and curtain pole, and—which I thought unnecessary—very loud cries and a great deal of hullabaloo."

"Really?" said the inspector, writing busily. 'Not so barmy, after all,' was the summary of his thoughts. "That certainly sheds new light, miss. Now, this clock of yours. Do you always carry it about with you?"

"Not invariably. Not when I go on holiday, for instance. But one can scarcely call this a holiday, and I was particularly anxious to wake in time. There was a busy day before us, as anyone who had had experience of social work of this kind would have known."

"Are you referring to the other ladies, miss?"

"Yes, I am," cried Miss Plimmon sharply. "I am referring to the other ladies. Miss Mortimer, of course, would do her part, I knew, but I did not trust those teachers."

"Well, miss, perhaps they thought they were entitled to take things a bit easy, as I understand they were rather being done out of their ordinary holiday."

Miss Plimmon was not the kind of woman who snorted, but she gave a slight, critical, fault-finding sniff, and said nothing. The inspector pressed the point.

"Do your ideas include all three of the teachers?" he asked.

"I am thinking of two in particular. I never speak ill of the dead," Miss Plimmon replied. The inspector groaned inwardly, and tried again.

"At what time did your clock run down, Miss Plimmon?"

"Well, you see, I always allow it half an hour, because it loses, and then I had put it on an extra quarter that night in case I was especially sleepy when it ran down, so I should think it must have been about a quarter to seven by the right time," said Miss Plimmon, assisting her mental processes by counting on her fingers. The inspector felt inclined to cross his.

"And did you get up at once, then?" he enquired.

"At once, inspector. I had not slept very well, as I think I told you, having heard noises in the night which you don't seem to want to have mentioned——"

"Now, miss," said the inspector, very sharply, "none of that, if you please! I said I wanted your statement confirmed. If it can be confirmed it will be one of the most important pieces of evidence we've had, and I can't think why you didn't produce it at the inquest."

"But I wasn't asked, inspector! Besides, I was very flurried at the inquest and I didn't really feel at all well. They should have *asked* me. Then I should have recollected it. My memory really isn't what it was."

"Very well, miss. So you got up at once, and took—about how long to dress?"

"Well, I hadn't done my *hair*, you know, when we heard Miss French call out and all that noise, but I *had* washed and dressed, so I suppose it would then have been perhaps five or ten past seven."

"Thank you, miss. That seems fairly clear. Now you heard the hubbub at ten past seven, we'll say. That fits in perfectly well from the rest of the evidence, and anyway," he added maliciously, "I can check it from Miss Smithers. She was up, too, I take it."

"Indeed not, inspector. What an idea! If I were that girl's mother——"

The unlikelihood of this was allowed by the inspector to pass unchallenged.

"So she wasn't up, miss?" he observed. "Did she get up immediately she heard it?"

"No, she did not. She merely put her arms behind her head and said that it sounded to her like the Last Trump."

"But I understood she went into the room with you?"

"Oh, yes, she did, but only because I insisted."

The inspector made another hasty note and perturbed Miss Plimmon by underlining it vigorously.

"I said we ought to go and see if anybody was

hurt," she continued, her colour heightening. "But Miss Smithers saw fit to reply that if anything happened to Miss French it was all right with her, and that if she broke her neck it might save the hangman that trouble."

"*What?*" said the inspector.

"Oh, yes, she did," Miss Plimmon triumphantly averred. "Of course," she added swiftly, "you'll never get her to admit it, and I am the only witness, but say it she did, if I were on my dying oath."

The inspector earmarked the last vulgarity. For him it disposed of Miss Plimmon. He felt he had placed her at last. "It was no good," he explained to his sergeant later, "her trying to come the lady after that." He also thought her an entirely untrustworthy witness, malicious, prejudiced and imaginative. After her last remark there was a discreet but uncomfortable silence. Then the inspector said briefly:

"I see, miss. What happened next?"

"Well, of course, I insisted that we should go and see what had happened, so she leapt out of bed and said that, after all, it might be Miss Francis, and actually managed to get to the door before I did. I'm afraid there was rather unhealthy sentiment there, inspector."

"You mean Miss Smithers was very friendly with Miss Francis?"

"Friendly? No. I wouldn't call it that. There was too much difference in their ages. Miss Smithers was more like a schoolgirl."

"Oh, I see," said the inspector. "Sort of—what

do you ladies call it—crushed on Miss Francis. Very natural, I suppose, at her age.”

Miss Plimmon began to expostulate, but the inspector adhered to his views by asking her, loudly and firmly, what had happened when she and Miss Smithers had gone to Miss French’s assistance.

“Well,” said Miss Plimmon—the inspector could place this opening word. It was to give Miss Plimmon a little more time to think—“I personally would have knocked on the door. Miss Smithers, of course, poor girl, is not refined. She just pushed open the door and rushed straight in.”

“She met with no resistance?”

“None that I could see. In she went, and so, of course, as I was rather anxious, I followed her, and then we saw what had happened.”

“Yes? What had happened?” asked the inspector coldly.

“Well, we helped Miss French to her feet, and then she said——”

“Just one minute, Miss Plimmon. Never mind what she said.”

“But I thought you wanted to know what happened, inspector.”

“Yes, I do. What was said is not what happened. What did you actually do?”

“Well, Miss Smithers——”

“Not Miss Smithers, miss. *You*.”

“Well, I really extricated Miss French, and Miss Smithers——”

“Not Miss Smithers, miss, if you really don’t mind. It is only your own actions that I would like you to account for.”

"Oh, I see. Well, Miss Smithers——"

The inspector sighed, shook his head, gave it up, and allowed her to continue.

"Miss Smithers," pursued Miss Plimmon, unaware, for once, that she had triumphed, "decided to rouse Miss Francis, whilst I continued to help Miss French, who was *quite involved* with the curtains."

"Ah," said the inspector, much more hopefully.

"Oh, yes, indeed, inspector. *Hopelessly* involved I would have said, except that I do not believe in exaggerated descriptions or in any expression of despair. And the more I tried to assist her the more involved we became, until Miss Smithers let out that dreadful scream, a scream," continued Miss Plimmon earnestly, "that I cannot think, in spite of *all* the circumstances (and they were certainly *most* deplorable) was absolutely necessary. Of course, one has to remember that a very unhealthy friendship existed, as I said, between the two. I could tell that, coming down in the train."

"I thought you were asleep coming down in the train, and, anyway, in another compartment," said the inspector to himself. He made another note. "But if they were so fond of one another," he said aloud, "why didn't they share one double bedroom, and leave you and Miss French the other?"

"Because," said Miss Plimmon, "I *absolutely refused* to share a room with anyone as drunk as Miss French."

"Now that won't do, miss, you know," said the inspector gently. "You've got to remember the rooms were all settled before you ladies had any

drinks at all. You'll have to explain that statement. Exactly how drunk was Miss French, anyway, miss ? ”

“ So drunk,” replied Miss Plimmon, looking, as the inspector subsequently explained to a friend, like the statue of George Washington on a dirty night, “ that it even seemed to her a good idea to go down to the saloon bar on the ground floor of the house and *indulge* with some of the men.”

“ Surely not, miss ? What time of night was this ? ”

“ Half-past eleven at least. And, of course, you're right about the rooms. I quite remember now. But my memory isn't what it was. I believe Miss French herself decided to share with Miss Francis.”

The inspector snapped his note-book shut and looked at her severely.

“ Impossible, miss. I know Joe Herberd, I tell you, and Joe wouldn't do such a thing.”

“ Such a thing as what, inspector ? I am saying nothing against the character of the landlord. I was speaking about Miss French and the bedrooms, I thought. Indeed, I know nothing about him.”

“ Best keep a still tongue, then, in that case, miss. Joe Herberd is not the man to risk his licence serving drinks past closing-time, I *do* know. If the young lady had one with Joe at half-past eleven at night, that drink was on the house, at Joe's special and private invitation.”

“ I can't say as to that,” retorted Miss Plimmon. “ And it doesn't affect what I'm saying,” she added justly. “ All that I am saying is that after having

had far too much to drink already that evening, she went down and had some more before she went to bed. What was more, she did her very level best to persuade Miss Francis to go with her."

"So it was really due to *you* that Miss French and Miss Francis shared a room," said the inspector, suddenly grinning. "Well, I don't blame you, miss."

Miss Plimmon was obviously surprised at this remark, but after slight hesitation she agreed. "I spoke to Miss Mortimer about it before she went to her room, and we agreed that the Education Committee should certainly be informed."

"About Miss French or Miss Francis? You mean the drinks, I suppose."

"About Miss French. Miss Francis, poor girl, was led away into drinking far more than she ought. Her condition, of course, was obvious."

"Was it?" said the inspector absently. He was thinking of something else. "Tell me, Miss Plimmon, do you dislike Miss French?"

"I have no particular cause to," Miss Plimmon replied. The inspector shook his head, and regarded her with a semi-humorous smile.

"That won't do, miss, I'm afraid. You must answer the question more directly. *Did* you dislike Miss French? Before you came down here, I mean?"

"If I did, I suppose you'll take no notice of anything more I say," protested Miss Plimmon.

"Now, miss," said the inspector solemnly, "that's not a right attitude at all. You ought to think more what you're saying. I'm sure you're as anxious

to get to the bottom of this business as even I am, and to do it I've got to have your help and the help of everyone concerned. But I *must* ask *some* awkward questions, and apparently this is one of them."

"Indeed it isn't an awkward question, inspector. I hardly knew Miss French before this unhappy holiday plan was discussed, but I grew to dislike her in the meetings, and I didn't at all approve of her behaviour in getting drunk. After all, that is not what we pay our teachers for, is it?"

"Poor devils," said the inspector, alienating for all time the sympathy of Miss Plimmon, and, for his own part, crystallising his first antipathy into downright dislike. Miss Plimmon made no reply to his sympathetic exclamation. Perhaps she thought that sympathy was not what we paid our police inspectors for.

IV

The Story Told by the Lady of Independent Means

★

MISS MORTIMER STRUCK AN ORIGINAL, UNWELCOME note.

"I can tell you all about this murder, inspector," she said, "and it was, of course, *not* a murder. That's perfectly clear."

"Now, madam," said the inspector. But the lady, tall, thin, keen-eyed and self-assertive, was not to be put off by any such meek interpolation.

"You listen to me, and think this out," she said. "It is the duty of every citizen to help the police in every possible way, and, painful though it is to me to say this, my duty I am quite determined to do."

"Very well, Madam," said the inspector resignedly.

"Pencil and note-book ready, then," said Miss Mortimer. "Take dictation."

"Nonsense, madam," said the inspector, much more firmly. "That won't do at all, as you must know. If you're going to make a statement, well, you go ahead. But leave me to mind my own business."

It was clear that Miss Mortimer was unaccustomed

to such a display of spirit. She looked at him, but the profession of the inspector had hardened him to looks. He merely waited. He won. Miss Mortimer dropped her gaze, and then said, suddenly and simply :

"Inspector, I'm certain it was suicide."

"But, madam, the medical evidence."

"Doctors!" said Miss Mortimer. "Do you know, inspector, that almost one-sixteenth of the London specialists in women's complaints have already given me up for dead. And look at me! Faith and works—that's all that is required."

At the mention of women's complaints the inspector passed a finger round the inside of his collar and silently prayed to be spared the revelations which he thought were about to follow. Miss Mortimer, however, possessed the early-Edwardian sense of propriety, and dismissed the internal economy of her sex with an explanatory sniff.

"I see, madam," said the inspector, very cautiously. He drew two spirals on his blotting paper, and this action apparently galvanised Miss Mortimer into further speech, for she said, with the incisive suddenness which made her conversation comparable to a series of small explosions, "I should prefer a witness."

The inspector indicated the sergeant.

"Oh, I hadn't seen him. Yes, he'll do. Now pay attention, sergeant. I don't care to repeat myself too often."

"Very good, sir," said the sergeant, looking at the inspector.

"Better make a shorthand note," said the

inspector, "then you can read it back to the lady and she'll sign it for us."

"Yes, if it is correct," Miss Mortimer graciously replied. "I am quite used to the police. We have them at *all* the civic functions in London."

"The murder, madam," said the inspector patiently.

"Certainly. I am just coming to the subject," said Miss Mortimer. "Now, inspector, just think my way for a moment, and keep an open mind. Doctors say the strangest things. Surely you must know that from your own experience. Now let me tell you one or two important facts about this poor dead creature.

"First, she was going to have a baby. Now, inspector, I ask you, what kind of woman has a baby out of wedlock? No, don't answer me: I'll tell you. Or, rather, let me say this: For a girl in a fine, well-paid, honourable position, is it not madness to have a baby if she is not married? Answer me. Isn't it?"

"Not necessarily, madam," replied the inspector, although privately he agreed with her.

"Oh, yes, it is. Suppose one of your young policemen became the father of an illegitimate child. What should you say?"

"Bravo," said the inspector, losing his temper. "Now, look here, madam, I don't want to seem abrupt, but we can't have this. If you're trying to tell me the girl must have been insane, it isn't any good. We can't prove it either way now. As for the question of whether it was murder or suicide, I prefer to believe the medical evidence to anything

you can tell me. And I'll just add this. You may or may not be the Grand Panjandrum up in your part of London, but you don't amount here to anything more than one of a number of people I've got to waste my time interviewing. Now you'll answer my questions in a proper manner, or you'll have to come along to the station in New Abbots where I belong."

He held up his hand as Miss Mortimer began to protest.

"No, madam," he concluded. "It's one or the other. Now which is it going to be?"

Miss Mortimer had not obtained her position on the various committees of her borough council without receiving some knocks, and she knew when to give in gracefully. She contrived to smile, and waved a gloved hand playfully.

"Really! You *masculine* young men!" she said; and drew off the glove. To the inspector, at one time a boxer, it was a symbolic gesture. He grinned, and settled to the fight.

"Now, madam," he said, "all I want is an account of your own movements on the day and night of the crime."

"Ah," said his antagonist. "Yes, I see. Let me see, now. Where shall I begin? Right at the beginning?"

"If you wouldn't mind, madam."

"I woke up at six."

"Your alarum clock, madam?" interrupted the inspector, with lively memories of Miss Plimmon.

"No, no. I simply woke. My personal maid had orders to call me at seven, but I am never at my

happiest on the morning of a journey. I woke at six, looked at my watch, rang for Lucy and read my Portion whilst the girl was dressing."

"Yes, madam?"

"Lucy brought my breakfast. I had——"

"Take it as read, madam."

"Very well. As a matter of fact, I ate scarcely a thing. When I was ready my chauffeur drove me to the Church Hall from which we were to start, and, after a short service conducted by the curate, the children, teachers and so forth set out in the buses and my chauffeur drove me to the station. There was some little delay there, I remember, and Miss Smithers had unaccountably and very carelessly left the railway voucher in her desk at her school and had to return, but fortunately the delay was long enough for her to leave us and rejoin us before the train came in."

"Where did the train stop on the journey, madam?"

"Oh, at a place called West Something, and on another occasion owing to an act of what I can only call bad behaviour on the part of one of the children. Would you believe it, inspector, she actually——"

"Pulled the communication cord in mistake for the lavatory chain. Yes, I heard that from the other witnesses, madam. Did anyone board the train at either of these two stops?"

"No."

"You are positive, madam?"

"Certainly. I always lean out of the corridor window when a train stops. I should have seen anyone boarding the train."

"Do you think that somebody desperate—in plain words, the murderer, madam—could have boarded the train from the opposite side?"

"No. I know that could not have happened, inspector."

"Indeed, madam?"

"Yes. You see, I am very nervous about children in trains, so I particularly asked the guard to see that the doors were locked. He replied that they locked them automatically and that there could be no possibility of children falling out. He said that there were dangerous bends on the line at the latter end of the journey, when the train began to climb out of the valley, and that people had been hurt leaning out."

"Well, madam," said the inspector, almost with enthusiasm, "that's the most sensible set of statements I've heard yet in reply to that question."

"Really?" said Miss Mortimer, not particularly enthralled by the compliment. "Am I to go on now? Because, if so, I should remark that there was a third stop. I don't recollect the name of the station, but buns and milk were served to the children there, and cups of tea to the helpers."

"Yes, madam, so we understood."

"Nobody got on to the train," said Miss Mortimer, anticipating, she thought, the next question.

"No, madam."

"We arrived at about half-past four, and were met at the station by people with cars. My own car was there, my chauffeur, under instructions, having driven down. The Guides were the first to be taken. It was not my wish, or theirs, that they should ever

put themselves forward, but we had no choice in the matter. They were driven to the hall in which that abominable inquest was afterwards held, and there we all had tea. Then began what I can only describe as a disgraceful orgy."

"Orgy, madam?" said the inspector.

"Well, it was more like a slave market than anything else I can think of," said Miss Mortimer very vigorously. "The children sat in rows both before they began and after they had finished their tea, and the people who were going to lodge them came and picked them out, and even quarrelled over them. Two women almost came to blows over a child called Margaret Smith—a rather silly little thing I thought her—until a somewhat undesirable old gentleman interfered and put things right."

"I see, madam. How did you and the other helpers employ yourselves during this time?"

"We tried to organise the lodgings, but, discovering very soon that we were doing no good and were losing our dignity, I forbade the others to attempt any further interference. At last the children were billeted and, at another hall, were seen by the doctor and their new addresses noted down, and then we were free to look for lodgings for ourselves."

"Rather a heavy day, madam."

"It was indeed. We had heard—I do not remember how—of this hotel (so-called), the *Rose and Thorn*, and, none of us knowing the place, we decided to spend the night there. Well, as soon as we got there I realised at once that it was by no means the kind of place I had been used to, and so

I suggested to Miss French that she should deal with the matter."

"You did not think of trying elsewhere, madam?"

"No, I did not. I could not desert the others, and as none of them seemed to realise that the place was nothing more or less than a public house I decided that I would accept it for the night. There would be opportunity on the morrow to make a change. Then, too, I was tired, and felt quite disinclined to roam the town in the darkness looking for an inn."

"Yes, I see, madam."

"We had a meal of some sort—I do not remember what—it was adequate if not enjoyable—and we drank sherry just before we commenced upon the food."

"Much sherry, madam?"

"The usual amount—one glass apiece," said Miss Mortimer sternly.

"I beg your pardon, madam. Please go on."

"Then, against my direct expostulation, Miss French insisted upon ordering cocktails and then beer. Miss Francis, of whom I thought differently, decided that *she* would have beer."

"To drink during the meal, madam?"

"During the meal, oh, yes, inspector. I'm glad you mentioned that. Of course they had the brandy later on. Miss Francis's attitude I can understand—dimly—but Miss French I thought very unwise."

"How do you mean, madam? Was Miss Francis more accustomed than Miss French?"

"No, no. On the contrary. On the contrary, inspector. Miss Francis was obviously affected by

what she had had to drink, and refused a second glass of brandy. Miss French, however, ordered and tossed off more, although I warned her I should feel it my duty to report that (and other behaviour on which there is no need to dwell) to the Education Committee upon my return. To this she returned a defiant and flippant answer. Miss Francis (whose condition, of course, had attracted my attention) was as good as dismissed from the service already—either on the grounds that she was married or on the grounds that she was immoral——”

“Oh? It comes to the same thing in the teaching profession, then, madam?”

Miss Mortimer seemed slightly taken aback by this refreshing thought. The inspector began to elaborate.

“It was just as much a misdemeanour to marry, madam, as to have an illegitimate baby?”

“Certainly not. The two things are, of course, quite different.”

“Granted,” said the inspector, with a dryness which was entirely lost upon the lady. “However, no matter for that, madam. What about Miss French?”

“Well, she *seemed* to feel no ill effect,” said Miss Mortimer, “but it seems to me that if she slept as soundly as she says she did, and if that poor creature killed herself whilst Miss French was actually in the room, then that sleep could scarcely be normal.”

“Was killed, madam; not killed herself. I thought we were agreed upon that,” said the inspector.

“Very well. But one thing I *will* say, contempt

of court or not," said the lady energetically, "and it's this: *Where was Miss French when Miss Francis died? Because she certainly wasn't in that room.*"

The inspector thought of Miss Plimmmon's so-far uncorroborated story of the door which opened in the night. There was much, he reflected, to disentangle. If Miss French had gone out of the bedroom and had stayed out for any length of time, there was no knowing how many permutations and combinations might have to be tried and rejected before the criminal or criminals could be named. On the other hand—— He stared at Miss Mortimer for such a long time that even her iron conceit began to melt into nervous apprehension.

"What is it, inspector?" she said.

"A leading question, madam, which I know you are too honourable and too conscientious to be influenced over by my suggestion contained in it. Madam, did you, by any chance, hear the next-door bedroom being opened and shut at any time during the night?"

"The room next to mine was empty, inspector. I was on a different corridor from the others," answered Miss Mortimer. "The bedrooms allotted were not all together, you see. But I am under the firm impression that there was *someone in my room* when I went up to bed on Monday night."

"Indeed, madam?" said the inspector, unimpressed. He had heard this theory before from elderly ladies. "One often gets these ideas in a strange house, I believe."

Miss Mortimer opened her mouth to speak, then looked at his face, and put her lips together again.

"You don't think, then, madam, that Miss French could have murdered Miss Francis?" said the inspector.

"A most improper suggestion!" said Miss Mortimer. "I myself was on the Selection Committee which appointed her!"

V

The Story Told by the Landlord



THE LANDLORD OF THE 'ROSE AND THORN' was well known to the inspector. They had, in fact, been boys at school together and had continued a friendship which had begun when both were thirteen.

The landlord was a handsome, bull-like man with dark curls, a bass voice and a jovial manner which was natural as well as professional.

He had seen a good deal of the police since the murder, but since neither they nor the murder itself had done anything to diminish his weekly takings, he assisted them not only as a good citizen, but as one who wished them success in their efforts and was deeply interested in their investigations. He reflected that it would do no harm to business for him to be in the position, later on, of being able to show where, and to tell how, the murder had taken place. His clients at the bar would like it. His paying-guests, the commercials, would not object.

"Well, Joe," said the inspector, having dismissed the ladies kindly and politely before he walked uphill to the *Rose and Thorn*, "how goes it this morning? Any news?"

"Ah. That there batty son of Lady Muriel's up to Stack House be missing again. Remember how you had to hunt for him before?"

The inspector groaned, and then brightened up as he reflected that someone else would have to hunt for the Honourable Cedric this time, as he himself could scarcely be taken away from a case of murder for anything so frivolous as a mere 'missing from his home.'

"He'll turn up all right," he said carelessly. "Now Joe, I've got to talk to you in private. When's the best time? Now?"

The landlord glanced at the clock, traditionally ten minutes fast.

"Yes, now, I don't see why not. Emmy can manage the bar. There won't be much doing. They've all had their dinner-time pint. Come into the saloon. What's yours?"

"No, the drinks are on me," said the inspector. After their usual amicable argument they compromised in their usual amicable fashion by taking it in turns.

"Now, Joe," said the inspector, "I want a lot of confidential information, and I want it clear and good. Do you get me?"

"About the five ladies. I get you," the landlord replied. He got a swab from behind the counter and thoughtfully mopped up a pool of water left by a rinsed and unwiped tumbler. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, everything *you* know, Joe. It's this way. I've questioned all four, and I'm fairly certain that nobody got on the train after it left London."

"Don't help much," said the landlord. "If anyone followed the poor young woman down here intending the worst, he'd have got on in London and never been spotted by anyone, so far as I can see."

"Yes, you're quite right there. But it's cleared up just the possibility. Now it doesn't seem possible that the dead woman met a man here before the whole lot of them went upstairs to bed. I'm certain I'd have been told of it first thing. Do *you* know whether she met anyone?"

"Not that I know of. I'll tell you what happened with those ladies. Emmy and Ivy met 'em first when they walked themselves in. Come in by the entrance here, same way as you did, and fetched up outside this saloon door, and Emmy and Ivy, hearing ladies' voices, came out to see what was wanted, and that there red-'aired piece who shared the dead woman's room—and *that's* a fair knock-out to me, so I tell you truly, Henry—she took upon herself the ordering, asks for supper and beds for the lot of them, and then walks in here, as large as life, and calls for a whisky and soda."

"*What?*" said the inspector. "That' not what I heard from the others."

"Ah, no doubt they knowed nowt about it," said the landlord, winking and grinning. "There was a fair old dragon of a party (about sixty, I should say, and some kind of a manager among 'em), shoos 'em all up to their rooms to get 'em split out. But my red-haired beauty, she just calls up the stairs: 'I'll have half of a double, don't matter who with,' and then walks herself in here, sits down

on that stool next to yours, and grins at me, and says : ' That's just what I'll have, if it's all the same to you, landlord, or whether it isn't,' she says. ' Half of a double, and then you can double it again.' "

" I don't get this," said the inspector. " Do you mean to tell me it was just by accident she was sharing the room with Miss Francis ? "

" I can't answer that, but I'll swear to what I heard," replied the landlord, " and that's what I've been telling you. She never went up aloft with the others at all ; just hollered up the stairs what I said ; then walked herself in here and had this whisky and split soda, followed it with another, said she'd have to nip up and wash before supper, and off she went, and when I see her next she was ordering sherry for all of 'em, and laughing like anything with our Betty until she saw me coming, and then she switched her antics on to me. ' Here's the landlord,' she says. ' What's your name, Bill ? ' "

" ' Bassington-Bassington,' I says, for you always have to humour the customers until they've had as much as is good for 'em. Laugh ! I never heard a woman laugh more.

" ' You seem to have come into a fortune or something of that,' I said, she seemed so pleased with herself. At that she slapped me on the shoulder—very free and easy she was, but common as dirt, or so the missis says now—and told me she was going to make her fortune. ' I write books, Bill,' she says, ' and I'm on a best-seller, or else I don't know of no such thing.'

" 'That's good,' I said, giving Betty a flick of of me eye to tell her to go and get the sherry. The others had all come down by then and sitting round the fire in the commercial—I always keep a fire there, and in the parlour, as *you* know, summer and winter, and the evening wasn't all that warm. The old girl, she was sitting up straight in her chair looking as if the whole of my house stunk—I couldn't stomach her or her looks at all—but the others seemed very well pleased, and red-head, she raised a cheer when we sent in the supper."

"Now wait a minute," said the inspector. "This Miss French had two whisky and splash, sherry—what else before she went to bed?"

"Well, too much and too mixed, I should have said," admitted the landlord, "but not that you'd know it from her. Very much accustomed, I would have said. A pint of beer with her supper, and two neat brandies after it, and then another sent up to her room after that."

"*What?*" said the inspector.

"Ah, and here's where you ought to have got some finger-print powder like they have at Scotland Yard," said the landlord earnestly. "See what I mean, Henry? One neat double brandy—all of her brandies was doubles—couldn't get her nose inside the glass to drink up them thimblefuls, she said—and nothing to prove who got outside it. See what I mean?"

"You mean it may have been Miss Francis, Joe? I doubt it. She'd had enough, hadn't she, time she went up to bed?"

"Well, I should say she was over, but perfectly

ladylike with it. Quiet. Spilt her cup of tea all down her—they all had tea to finish up their supper—and knocked a chair over going out, and just a bit thick in the clear when she said good night, but nothing bouncy. I don't even think she'd got to the stage of feeling sick. But in *her* condition I wouldn't have advised the mixture, not really I wouldn't. Still, it wasn't my business, as long as she was all right. Now, the young 'un—well, she couldn't hardly get up the stairs at all, but the two of 'em set to and helped her, I'll say that for 'em, with red-'ead shouting the odds."

"Now, look here, Joe, you had some fun in the commercial, didn't you?"

"Fun?" said the landlord. "Oh, well, I wouldn't declare as we didn't. Red-'ead, she kept me laughing, and we had the chain-gang game—you know—first Fred coming up and bringing me my pint, and then Bert coming up and bringing him his—caused a lot of fun, that did—and then the missis she came up to see whether I was behaving myself, she *said*, but to tip me off a drunk wanted bouncing in the public bar, so down I had to go, and it was Kiddons, carrying on because they wouldn't serve him. 'Serve you, my lad,' I says, 'I'll serve you, right enough,' and out he went. You remember there was always that tale he killed his wife? Well, I, for one, believe it. You know, you can't always go by what the doctors say, Henry. Why, I know of two cases——"

While the landlord shared these reminiscences, his auditor was thinking, with some slight discomfort, of Miss Mortimer's somewhat similar views

about doctors. He remembered perfectly well the case of Kiddons. The man was a poacher, a drunk and a brute, and when his wife was found in the river, not one but forty tongues declared that she had met with foul play. The medical verdict was death due to heart-failure consequent on the shock of tumbling into the water, but the village had another, more picturesque, more horrible explanation.

'Plain murder, and he threw her in,' was the general summing-up when the inquest was over.

"Where *is* Kiddons now, by the way?" he asked.

"Why, here in Low Abbots," said the landlord, "still hanging about. You might do worse than keep an eye on *him*."

"Oh, he couldn't have any connection with this affair," said the inspector. "Well, now, take me over the rooms once again."

"Well, you won't see anything different from what you saw before," protested the landlord, nevertheless leading the way. "Have a look to the saloon, Emmy," he called, as he and the inspector came out on to the linoleum-covered hall.

"This staircase of yours will finish me off one day," the inspector continued, avoiding putting his feet on the broad brass treads of the stairs. "I hear the ladies slipped on it and nearly broke their necks. Oh, and by the way, that reminds me," he added, as, after a kind of dog's-leg bend, they came upon the first-floor landing. "Commercial room first, Joe. I didn't have a look in there when I came before."

The commercial room of the inn was a long, dark-papered room with a high ceiling covered with ornamental plaster, a candelabra of electric lamps, two large sash windows and a big open fireplace of the fashion of Victorianised William and Mary. A large bright fire was half-way up to where the grate merged into the chimney, and this, and the heavy dark curtains, gave the impression of a suffocating atmosphere although the room was not really stuffy.

"Hm!" said the inspector, walking to one of the windows and looking out. "A nice growth of ivy you've got, Joe."

"Ought to be chopped away, but the missus likes it," said the landlord. Then, as he caught the inspector's drift, he added: "Nobody climbed in that way, if that's what you're thinking. We lock this door, and I take away the key every night, on account the missus keeps one or two things like tins of biscuits, condensed milk, sometimes the cheese, in that sideboard, and guests staying the night have been known to come down and help themselves. Not as though we don't feed 'em, neither, but you can't have people walking round the house."

"Sure you locked the door on the night of the murder, Joe?" asked the inspector.

"Certain sure. One thing I said to the wife when we knowed what had happened: 'Well, Emmy,' I said, 'I don't see how he got in. I had the key, so the ivy didn't stand him in no stead, and there ain't another way in,' I said, 'barring the front and back doors, and the outside doors to the bars.' You can ask her whether I said it."

"It makes a good many entrances, though, Joe, don't it?"

"All bolted and barred. I see to that when we close. I'm not going to risk my licence having the police see people sneaking in at my bars after hours."

The inspector accepted this, nodding. Then he said :

"But the ivy doesn't stop here. It grows higher up."

"Come and see for yourself," said the host. They mounted towards the second floor of the house, and, still on the staircase, although at the top step but three, peered out of the staircase window. The ivy stopped about three feet short of this window, and was so thin at the top that it would not have borne the weight of anyone trying to climb in. Even if this were not enough, the staircase window was barred right across with iron.

"Had that done ten years ago when the missus had her little niece to stay. Child used to like this window for some reason—don't see why—and we was always afraid she'd fall out."

"Mind you," said the inspector, "I'll say this to you, Joe, because you're a very old friend, and because I know that not even your missus will hear it. I've got two people in mind for this murder, and two only."

"'Course. The red-head and the chap as got the poor young woman into trouble," said the landlord. "That's what we all figured out."

"Oh, you did, did you?" retorted the inspector. "Well, it may interest you to know that you're

wrong. If the red-head is in it at all, which I'm really beginning to doubt, it can be as accessory before and after the fact—that's serious enough, it's true—but she can't be the actual murderer."

"No?"

"No. And I'll tell you why. She didn't know, according to your own evidence, that she was going to sleep in the same room as the other woman. It all turned out accidental. Didn't you say she didn't go up with the others, but stayed down here and shouted to the others to settle the sleeping arrangements as they liked?"

"Ah, so I did. But look here. Suppose she was one of them maniacs. Didn't care who she done in? There are people like that, you know."

"Yes, in asylums," retorted the inspector. "If she was as dangerous as that we'd have had some other symptoms. Why, that girl's a teacher, managing forty-odd kids every day of her life."

"Enough to turn anybody homicidal," countered the landlord profoundly.

"Maybe. But—no, no, she's sane enough. If she had any *motive* for the murder, I don't know but what I wouldn't pinch her, even now. She certainly had the best opportunity for murder that anybody can imagine; that's if she really wanted to kill the other young woman."

"The motive might be revenge. You never can tell with these females, especially females living unnatural sort of lives," said the landlord, wagging his head. "What sort of life is it, I ask you, Henry, looking after forty children instead of the four or five that Nature probably intended? And not

allowed to marry at that. It's bloomin' cruel, I call it."

"Pinched the red-headed girl's bloke? There might be something in that," agreed the inspector, who had read somewhere that hell had no fury like a woman scorned, and who often believed what he read. "But how can I pin it on her?" he added gloomily. "If I could only prove that she *did* pick that room to sleep in! Now if they were people that lived here, I'd soon get to know all about it. Not a woman in the whole of Low Abbots but would be bursting to tell us. But these Londoners! It's like following black cats in the dark, and not one black cat, either," he concluded, *clarifying his point*.

The landlord nodded and sighed.

"But I don't see how you can count her out on account of the sleeping arrangements," he observed. "It might just have turned out she saw a chance she'd been looking for."

"Opportunity," murmured the inspector. "Yes, it's true, that is, certainly. Means, motive, opportunity."

"Means? Well, she couldn't do better than one of them feather pillars of ours," said the landlord. "Often and often I've said to the missus she'd suffocate herself one day sleeping down in the bed like she do, and that pillar nearly over her head. It wouldn't surprise me to hear that the suffocating done the job for her, Henry, and that all that there throttling wasn't needed."

The inspector glanced at him sharply.

"Where do you get that from?" he said. The

landlord waved a podgy, large, flexible hand at which the inspector stared, fascinated. "Doesn't matter," he went on, crushing down his thoughts of rippers and other sex-maniacs, "only—according to what the doctor, led by us, did *not* say at the inquest—it's very likely you're right. But I'd like to figure out how *you* figured it out."

"Common sense, and knowing our pillers," replied the landlord. This reply seemed to soothe the inspector. He relaxed his gaze, gave his shoulders a very slight twist as though he were shedding a burden and led the way up the last three stairs to the room which the murdered woman had shared for one night with Miss French. He looked around it, examined the self-locking door, proved once again to his satisfaction that the lock was in working order and then stepped across to the window. He remained so long looking out that the landlord came across and joined him.

"Pretty, isn't it?" he said. The inspector did not altogether think so. The hills still crouched like sleeping animals, more black than green, although the darkness thrown on them in the day-time was the dusky shadow of trees which grew on the south-west slopes.

"These curtains," he said. He climbed on a chair, decided it was not high enough for his purpose, got down and carefully covering the top with a piece of newspaper out of the otherwise empty fire-place, stood on the table to look at the curtain pole and fastenings.

"Can't see why on earth a thing like that should come down," he said, after giving it close inspection.

"Just what I said to the missus," agreed the landlord. "'Can't see why them curtains should come down,' I remember saying."

"Were they fixed exactly like this?" the inspector enquired.

"Yes, Henry, just the same. Me and Betty had a look at the fixings, the missus not being up to climbing about, just in case, after you and the doctor had gone and we had to put the curtains up again. I didn't see then, and I don't see now, why anything should have come down without it was deliberately pulled, and pulled pretty forcible at that?"

The landlord cocked an eye at the inspector, but the inspector had nothing to say. He made a note, and turned towards the bed.

"Nothing more here," he said. "We gave it the once-over properly. Show me the room the elderly lady slept in."

The landlord began to chuckle.

"I thought the old party a cut above such ideas," he said. "But it proves you never know. What do you think she said, Henry? 'There's somebody under my bed, landlord! There's somebody under my bed!'"

"Well, of course, if only to pacify her, I had to go and have a look. And, of course, it was all my eye!"

"Nobody there?" said the inspector. "Come on. Which way? Along here?"

"No, along this passage. Mind the step. Worst of these old houses, although the missus says it makes for interest. Mind and don't bump yourself against

that great old wardrobe. Always dark along here."

There was nothing to see in the room which Miss Mortimer had occupied, except the usual furnishings. The inspector looked out of the window.

"You go back to the other bedroom, Joe, and stick your head out," he said. The landlord obligingly returned to the room in which the murder had occurred, and which, as matters turned out, proved to be, for the next ten years, a gold mine, since everybody who put up at the hotel wanted to sleep in it.

He put out his head, and the inspector waved to him to put it in again. He rejoined him along the passage, and they went to the room which Miss Smithers and Miss Plimmon had occupied.

"Now," said the inspector, "to test the acoustics, or whatever it is."

"Don't speak coarse, Henry," said the landlord, whose mind tended to run upon one particular item of the evidence.

"Acoustics, you bonehead," said the inspector, grinning. "Now, you go in next door and lay down on the bed Miss French had. Then count a hundred, fairly slowly—like this: one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . got it? Then get up as quietly as ever you can, and cross to the bed Miss Francis had. Take your boots off, of course."

"Naturally," said the landlord, "seeing it's my own clean bedding." He went into the room. The inspector pushed the door to, but did not fasten it. Then he tiptoed into the adjoining room, closed the self-locking door, lay down on the nearest bed, which

was that which had been occupied by Miss Plimmon, and turned on his side so that his eyes were on the door. He listened intently, but could not hear a thing.

Five minutes passed. Then the landlord, raising his voice, called out to know whether that was all. The inspector got up, replied loudly in the affirmative and went into the adjoining room.

"Could be done without anybody being the wiser," he said. "Now, Joe, get back, and take the other bed this time. Lie down. That's right. Now I'm going to pretend to smother you with this pillow. Here goes. You can struggle if you like."

The attempt did not throw much light upon the probable tactics of the murderer. For one thing, it was to be supposed that the victim had been asleep and that, even if she had been capable of struggling, she stood no chance because of the suddenness, the surprise and the terrifying nature of the attack. Then it was not an easy matter to compare the strength and knack of the inspector with that of the murderer, or the amount of resistance put up by the male, and hale-and-hearty landlord, with the much feebler powers of a female victim and, at that, five months with child.

"All right, Joe," said the inspector, putting back the pillow and picking fluff off his trousers. "Come down and let's have a drink. There's nothing more I can do, except interview your housemaid. Dorrie, isn't it? Not Betty. She's the barmaid. All right, I'd like to see her before I go. What's yours?"

"A double whisky," said the landlord. He scrubbed his maltreated countenance with the

palms of his hands. "If you ever go in for suffocating people, my lad, I'll go to Australia, I reckon, to keep out of your way."

Dorrie was a small, quick-eyed girl with a slight stammer. Nervousness made it more noticeable.

"D-didn't n-notice n-nowt," said she; and stuck to it. The inspector tried again.

"You made the beds in Room Three and Room Five, didn't you?"

"N-not th-that m-morning."

"No. I mean usually."

"Y-yes, b-but missus always g-give me a hand."

"What happened to the ladies' night-clothes on the morning of the murder?"

"The d-dead one she had h-hers on, and the one th-that slep' in the b-bed n-next had ch-chucked hers down on the f-floor and I p-picked them up and h-hung them over the r-rail and I n-never scen th-them n-no m-more. They was ever so dirty, though. D-don't wonder sh-she was ashamed."

"Right. And the other ladies?"

"One h-had h-hung hers out, sh-she s-said, to air——"

'Miss Plimmon,' noted the inspector mentally.

"Th-the other in th-that room b-bundled hers into h-her case be-because th-they wanted m-mending and sh-she d-didn't w-want 'em l-looked at, I r-reckon."

The inspector nodded at this just exposition of Miss Smithers's character.

"And th-the old l-lady in N-number S-seventeen, she h-had f-folded hers up and p-put it into h-her case."

"Now how do you know that? You don't pry into people's cases, Dorrie, do you?"

"N-no, of c-course I d-don't! I w-wouldn't k-keep my p-place long if I d-did. Sh-she l-left the l-lid open so I s-seen the n-night-dress inside. It w-was wh-white, w-with a f-frill round the n-neck. A p-proper old gr-granny's night-gown, I sh-should c-call it."

VI

The Story Told by the Poacher



TOM KIDDONS WAS A SMALL, BROWN, MONKEY-FACED man except for one notable feature. This was that his eyes were large and blue, like two periwinkles, or, some said, violas. For the rest, he was shabbily dressed in an earthy-looking suit which Puck, perhaps, could have worn did he ever take the guise of a mortal, and a pair of ancient leggings which looked as though the bark of a tree had supplied them.

Those who knew him best (and few knew him really well ; he took care of that, for he was wary as the stoat to which he was often compared) said that he could whistle a vixen out of her den, her cubs playing around her, and that when he wanted a rabbit or a pheasant or a fish, he called it and it came.

Since the death of his wife he had been avoided by almost all those who once had sought his company at the public houses he frequented, and he had become very solitary, changing his base—one could not call it a home—every couple of months or so, and contriving, no one knew how, to make a living, for there had been little complaint of his poaching for some time past.

The fact was that even this cunning and bold little weasel (or stoat, as some preferred it) had become alarmed and apprehensive after the inquest on his wife, and for some time he went in fear not only of the law but for his life ; for the drowned woman had two brothers, and once, in liquor, Tom had informed the public bar at the *Bull and Calf* that it was only a matter of time before one or other of them ' got him.'

The first day he had appeared in public after that had been in the bar at the *Rose and Thorn*, and the bouncing he had received from the landlord that night (which happened to be the night on which Miss Francis was murdered) persuaded him that not only his wife's two brothers but all the world was against him, and was in a black conspiracy to do him down.

As a matter of fact, he had not murdered his wife. The thought of murdering her had often come to him, and he had uttered it in her hearing. He had said that it would one day be the only course left open to him, for the woman was dirty and dissolute, and often spoiled in the cooking such trophies of the hunt as he could not sell by stealth to the hotels in New Abbots. The truth behind her death was, quite simply, that she had tumbled into the river as she and Kiddons were taking some pheasants into New Abbots by night in order to dispose of them quietly to one of his most valued customers at a time when there would be no curious gazers. She had stumbled, cried out, clutched at the bank, lost her hold and fallen back into the river with a splash. He had snatched up the load she had been carrying,

waited a minute or two, adjured her to "Come up, there," as though she had been a horse between shafts on a hill and, finding she did not respond, went on without her. He had had a few beers (so had she), and he was genuinely surprised and shocked (although it cannot be said that he was grieved) to discover that she had been drowned. His retort when the police informed him of what had occurred, and invited him to make an explanation, consisted of the awe-inspiring words: "Dead, be she? Well, it ain't no business o' minc."

The inspector came upon him in the obvious place—outside the door of the public bar of the only disreputable public house in New Abbots. The inspector was on his way home to lunch, and had not thought of interviewing Kiddons that day. However, the opportunity could not be lost, so he accosted the picturesque loungee with the cheerful greeting:

"Hullo, Tom! Can't you get any more on credit?"

"Credit!" said the poacher; and spat. "I'm not drinking these days, Mr. Jervis. You ought to know that as well as anyone. I've not been taken up, sir, for——"

"All right, all right," interrupted the inspector. "You're being taken up now. You come along to the station, my lad. I've several things I want your advice about, if you're sober enough to give it."

"But I haven't done nothing, I tell you," replied the poacher, "beyond making a few remarks at that there inquest t'other day. Laugh! I thought I should a-died when young Tom Brownlow give his everdence. Talk about looking a fool——!"

"O.K.," said the inspector. "Make it slippy. I haven't got all the afternoon to waste, like you."

He drove on, sent the constable on duty out for some bread and cheese, rang up his wife and told her to have her own lunch and keep his hot for an hour and told the sergeant to lodge Tom Kiddons in a cell as soon as he appeared on the doorstep.

"Got him at last, sir, have you?" demanded the sergeant, pleased. The inspector shook his head.

"Not a thing—as yet. But I want to cool him off before I talk to him. He's got one of his saucy moods. That's him, talking to Bob. Shove him into cold storage, and, at the end of twenty-five minutes (that ought to be long enough to give him the chance to think up all the things we might have pinched him for), push him along to my office."

"Very good, sir," said the sergeant, saluting; for Kiddons was no favourite of his.

The treatment apparently had almost more than the desired effect, for when the poacher was brought before the inspector he did not protest about the cell or even about being kept waiting—subjects on which the inspector had hoped he would be plaintive. He merely stood there, a lithe little ferret of a man, twisting his cap in his hands and leering nervously.

"Sit down, Tom," said the inspector, with such hearty geniality that the poacher, sitting down, glanced nervously behind and around him as though he expected a trap. "Make your mind easy," continued the inspector. "We've nothing on you that we're going to make public, Tom, as long as you can tell us a straightforward story. Now, then.

You say you were at the inquest. Why did you bother to go?"

"Bother, Mr. Jervis?" exclaimed the poacher. "It wasn't no bother to me. Since I had my bit of land taken off me by no fault at all of my own, I've had little to occupy my time, especially since I had to give up my 'ome when my poor wife——"

"Cut it out, Tom," said the inspector. "I know more than you think about that. Well, all right, we'll take it as correct what you said. You had nothing much to do, so you thought you'd go to the inquest."

"No harm in that," said the little man, sliding back from the edge of his chair and hanging his hat upon one knee.

"That's what we're here to find out," the inspector announced, with a slight but not a reassuring grin. "Tom, what were you up to that night the poor woman was murdered."

The poacher looked genuinely astounded.

"Me, Mr. Jervis?" he said. His monkey face became piteous. "You can't bring me in on that, sir! Honest, I couldn't tell you a thing if I was to be killed for not knowing."

"I'm not asking you anything about her death," said the inspector. "I'm asking what you were doing on the day before the murder."

"Oh, but, Mr. Jervis, that's telling," protested Kiddons. "I know it's no good me trying to hood-wink *you*, sir, but I wasn't doing owt to hurt nobody."

"Well, come on. What *were* you doing? That's the point."

"I was directing a man across country, Mr. Jervis. That was in the morning."

"What are you talking about?"

"Truth, if I never tell it again, Mr. Jervis! That's all in the world I was doing. And it's no use you asking me to prove it, without you can find the gentleman."

"You'd better cough it all up, Tom," said the inspector. "Come on, let's have the whole yarn. And don't embroider it. You'll find the truth a lot safer, if you get me."

The poacher eyed his tormentor deliberately for a minute, then he lifted his shoulders and sighed. There was a second of hesitation. Then, with a slight preliminary cough, and with a fidgety gesture of moving the hat from his knee, he told an extraordinary story. It was not the kind of thing he was capable of inventing. Even the inspector, who was lacking in imagination, knew that. The story might have its moments of exaggeration, its tactful slurrings and scurrings, but, in the main, it must be the truth, and, as such it opened up a field for enquiry and research beyond all that had been told to, or discovered by, the police.

It began at nine o'clock of the morning upon which the children and helpers had set out from London to New Abbots. Kiddons, who, after the death of his wife, had given up his cottage and now lodged with a family nearly as lawless as he was, had set out at eight-thirty to walk across the hills to a place called Blackwater Farm, where he had heard there was work to be had.

"Work!" said the inspector sardonically at this

point. The poacher, breaking off his narrative, regarded him with quiet dignity.

"Rabbits, Mr. Jervis," he explained. "I had Bandy along of me, and they were finishing the last of the cutting on the biggest field of the farm, and there was an invite to chaps with good dogs."

The inspector accepted what he felt must be a free translation of the facts, nodded and filled a pipe. Catching a yearning eye, he put his finger and thumb into his pouch, pulled out a generous quarter-ounce of the weed and gave it into the poacher's dirty palm.

"Ah, thankce, Mr. Jervis," said Tom, taking out a short, filthy clay and dividing the tobacco neatly into several small plugs. "That's good. That's not shag tobacco, neither."

"It's my favourite mixture, you old thief," responded the inspector. "Here!" He gave him a box of matches out of the drawer of his desk. "Now, then, get on with that yarn. You don't know how interested I am."

Kiddons eyed him warily, and then allowed his earthy-brown face to relax in a satyr's smile of mirth and malice mingled. He had been walking along the mountain road, his dog at his heels, thinking of things in general but of nothing very particularly, when a motor-cyclist with a side-car attached to his machine asked him the way to Aldway Bishops. He had told the cyclist that he had come miles off his route, and the man thereupon requested to be directed on to it.

The upshot was that the directions were so complicated—"You know how it would be, yourself,

Mr. Jervis, if you were on that road and wanted the Bishops"—that it was the suggestion of the rider that the poacher should sit in the side-car and direct him as they went along. The poacher demurred, explained that he had business in quite another direction and had lost enough time already, but the motor-cyclist persisted in his request, and, in the end, offered him five shillings if he would go along with him.

"Not as I liked the idea of it, Mr. Jervis," said the narrator, breaking off to search the inspector's face with his bright blue eyes.

"What, afraid of being kidnapped, you old sinner?" said the inspector, amused.

"I knowed, even then, there was something funny about the business," said Kiddons soberly. "Still, five bob is five bob. I had him show it me first and let me spit on it for luck, and then I climbed in, and off we went.

"Well, the first thing was some cows. That was after we got in the valley.

"'Get out,' he says, very nervous, 'and drive 'em away.' A funny, high voice he had, too, and it was then I suspicioned it was a woman I was along of."

"Nothing in that," said the inspector. "Plenty of women motor-cyclists, and in the get-up some of 'em look like men."

"Well, you can say what you like," the poacher argued, "but I knew in my bones, Mr. Jervis, he didn't really want me to think as it might be a woman. He wanted me to think he was a man."

"Oh, well, that isn't surprising. Think what you

generally look like, and remember it was a very lonely road."

"There's no call to insult me," responded Tom. "Do I go on, or don't I, Mr. Jervis?"

"Just as you like," said the inspector cheerfully.

"So I climb into the side-car," the poacher continued, "and give the dog the idea to go to ground and wait there till I come back, and we ride down the hill by Fiddler's Warren until we come to the Mantle."

This was an old, deserted house which had been gutted by fire and was considered past repair. Here the motor-cyclist had pulled up, got off, walked to the gates, looked through and then said that he thought perhaps he wouldn't go any farther after all.

The poacher, getting out of the side-car, was about to expostulate (thinking that perhaps he would not receive his five shillings) and to explain that the house was ruinous and that nobody had lived there for years, when his curiosity was aroused by what he described as the antics of his companion. These antics took the form of pushing open the iron gates, which the poacher had supposed to be locked, wheeling the combination in and closing the gates afterwards. The poacher pushed them open again, demanding his five shillings. Rather to his surprise, the motor-cyclist made no demur, but, thrusting his hand into the left-side pocket of his breeches, he brought out some silver, picked out two florins and two sixpences and handed them over.

The poacher pocketed them, wished the bestower good day and went outside the gates again.

"I looked back when I got in the lane, but he watched me," said Kiddons, "until I dropped down a little runnel I knowed of, which looked like the path to them as wouldn't know the country."

From this runnel he had worked his foxy way back to the house, and had crawled to the gate to look in. The motor-cyclist had his back to him, and was uncoupling the cycle from the side-car. When he had done this—he worked clumsily but seemed to know what he was doing ("More nor I should a-thought a woman would," observed the witness), he dragged the side-car out through the gates again—the poacher having concealed himself in a ditch—and across the lane which led to the house, and so to a steep escarpment of the hill which ended in a jumping-off place which had once been a stone quarry.

Over the edge he pushed the side-car, and both he and the witness, who had crawled to another point of vantage, watched it bump and leap to its destruction at the foot of the quarry.

"It was more like something on the pictures," said Kiddons. After that the motor-cyclist had returned to the grounds of the house, wheeled his motor-cycle up to the house, parked it there and returned to the hilly lane. Here he had looked carefully about, even ascending to the top of the rise, and then, on his return, exploring a hundred yards or so up a couple of paths in turn, to make sure that the coast was clear. Assured that it was (for it would have taken a hawk, as the inspector appreciated, to discover Kiddons if he had decided to lie hidden) the motor-cyclist then went back

to his motor-cycle and wheeled it back to the gates.

Another, but a shorter, reconnaissance followed, and then he mounted his machine and rode off in the direction of New Abbots. As it was impossible to follow him, the poacher went back for his dog, and continued upon his original course to the rabbit hunt (or whatever it really was, amended the inspector mentally).

"Well, Tom," he said, at the conclusion of the narrative, "you've got an imagination, sure enough. What was the number of the motor-cycle?"

It was at this point that he received a severe shock.

"Ah," said Kiddons, "wouldn't you like to know?"

"Well, it might be interesting," the inspector negligently answered. "Don't tell me you can supply those missing numbers?"

"And suppose I do?"

"Well—suppose you do. What then? But you can't. You don't bluff me into letting you skip off home. I'd never see or smell you again."

"Oh, come, now, Mr. Jervis," protested the small, brown man. "If you don't trust me, send one of your flat-footed old bullocks along, and he'll bring me back safe. If you want it should be so, Mr. Jervis, they numbers can be in your very hands in half an hour from now."

"Make it an hour and a half, and I'm your man," retorted the inspector. "I want to get home to my lunch."

He called to the sergeant, and had the protesting yet curiously nervous witness taken back to a cell.

"I don't know whether anything will break," he said to his wife as he sat and smoked a pipe at the conclusion of his meal, "but obviously this motor-cyclist, whether man or woman, did not want to be recognised. If Kiddons is telling the truth, this fellow did more than take the side-car off the bike. He changed his number plates as well. Silly of him. He ought to have screwed the new ones on top of the old."

He returned to the police station, and sent a constable with Kiddons to the wretched cottage where he lodged. They did not, however, return with number plates, and the inspector, having released the poacher, telephoned his chief constable. The chief constable promised to come down to New Abbots, but added that work in his rose-garden prevented his coming that day.

Upon this, the inspector, whose superior often tried his patience, decided that the fine afternoon called for a walk, so, taking his wife by surprise, he returned home, changed into flannel trousers and a sports jacket, took an ashplant and his fox terrier and walked over the hill to the burnt-out, deserted house.

The gates had no padlock. He pushed them apart and walked in. There had been no rain for nearly a fortnight, and the proof that part of the poacher's story might be true lay on the edge of the neglected lawn and, more faintly, on the weed-grown gravel drive.

The inspector noted the marks of the tyres, and then determined upon a dangerous but interesting investigation of the contents of the near-by quarry.

He called to the dog, which was enjoying itself in its own fashion by exploring the garden and the shrubbery of the house, closed the gates behind him and walked up the steep hill-road which bore away to the left. When he reached the top of the slope he lay on his chest and peered over. He thought he could see the side-car, but it was partly hidden by elder-bushes which grew near the foot of the quarry, so he began to climb down.

The little dog watched, and barked. His owner commanded him to remain where he was, and he stood on the brink, his strong forelegs planted wide, his pretty head on one side, an attitude half of defiance, half of enquiry.

The inspector clambered carefully, reached the lip of the quarry safely, found a ledge wide enough to turn round on and, bracing himself against the hill, caught hold of a bush and had another look at the quarry.

From the point to which he had climbed there was no doubt about what his eyes had fastened on. There, certainly, was a side-car. He could not ignore the thought, however, that, with a little twister like Kiddons, the tale of the motor-cyclist's behaviour might be nothing more than embroidery following on the chance discovery (on one of his expeditions) of the disused side-car in the quarry.

Hazardous though the climb would be, he thought he had better descend to the bushes which partly hid it from view, and have a close look at the wreckage. This he did, pleased to think that he had on old flannel trousers which his wife had attempted to sell to the rag and bone merchant,

but which his bitter protests had managed to rescue. Well, she would have her way next time with them, he thought, surveying with rueful amusement the spectacle he presented by the time he had climbed, slipped, scrambled and, finally, rolled, into the bottom of the quarry.

There was the side-car, its wheel in the air and its coachwork not as much battered as one would have expected, considering the distance and the roughness of its fall. It was coloured blue, was by no means a new one and offered no information of itself which could be, the inspector thought, of the slightest value, except that it had been discarded purely at the whim or through the necessity of its owner, for it was, tyre and all, if not as good as new, at least as good as second-hand.

Interested, although not much wiser, he climbed carefully and with difficulty to the top of the quarry and on to the side of the hill. Had he been asked the question he would have said that any theory he had formed about the case must be based upon, altered and adjusted in accordance with, the facts in his possession. In actual practice (although he himself was not aware of it) the converse was the case, as it must be with nearly all half-trained mentalities. Having formed the theory that the most likely murderer was Miss French (for, without any good reason, he was inclined to accept Miss Smithers's ingenuous hypothesis that the dead woman must have been married), he was now trying to fit into this theory all the facts which, so far, he had gathered. The most striking fact of all, the negative fact that, so far as his researches had taken

him, she had had no motive for the deed, he excluded from his collection of data, and that for the good and sufficient reason that he believed the motive would be bound to appear in due course.

He strode homeward down the hill, full of the notion that somehow (although none of the evidence so far suggested it in the slightest), Miss French had been there on the morning of the journey from London, that she had not accompanied the children nor been seen by the other helpers, and that she had attempted to cover her tracks first by appearing in the district with a motor-cycle combination, then by getting rid of the side-car and the original number plates, and then had driven off on a solo motor-cycle with new number plates attached. He hoped he would be able to get Kiddons to produce the original number plates, that was all.

Then a fresh thought struck him. Suppose the poacher, either through inadvertence or for his own purposes, had named the wrong day on which these things had occurred? It was a tempting inference that Miss French had come, not on the morning of the children's day of travel, but on the preceding day.

He calculated mileage on the back of an old envelope. It was a good stretch for a girl to do in a day—nearly two hundred miles—but not an impossible one. It created a new fact—this new theory of his. She must have come down on the Saturday, gone back on the Sunday, and then come down by train again, with the children, on the Monday. Teachers got Saturday and Sunday holiday. There would have been nothing to prevent her spending

the week-end motor-cycling if she wanted to. In any case he supposed that the schools had broken up.

He had just put the envelope into his pocket and picked up his stick which he had rested against the boulder upon which he had chosen to sit whilst making his notes, when he saw a woman coming up the hill. She walked well, with long steps, easily, and behind her followed a trail or straggle of children. It was Miss French. The inspector had to think quickly. Should he greet her and pass on and interview her on his own ground, down in the town, either at the police station or at her lodgings, or should he risk an encounter upon the hill-side here, his questions unprepared and his antagonist (for so he now regarded the red-haired girl) able to shelter herself behind the needs of her charges? By the time she came within distance he had made up his mind. She bent to pat the dog, and the inspector, coming up, raised his cap.

"Good afternoon, Miss French. On duty to-day, I see."

"Well, somebody's got to be, some of the time," she retorted.

"You know this way up the hill pretty well by now, I take it?"

"Oh, no. It's the first time I've brought the children this way. Miss Smithers told me about it. Is it true there's a dangerous quarry near the top?"

To say that the inspector was nonplussed by this bold carrying of the war into his province would not be short of the truth. He was astounded at what he privately classed as her impudence. He also glanced down at his torn and muddy trousers.

"Well, yes. I shouldn't let the youngsters get near the edge," he said. "As a matter of fact, I've just been enjoying a scramble down into it myself. There's the blue side-car of a motor-cycle down there."

He glanced at her as he said this, but her face betrayed nothing but amusement.

"I hope you enjoyed it," she said. "Well, I must be getting on, or the little dears will be up there breaking their necks before I can catch up with them."

Without waiting a second longer she walked on up the hill. The inspector, reflecting upon the well-known cold-bloodedness of the major criminal, went home feeling only very slightly disgruntled. His afternoon, he thought, had not been wasted. There was more to be done, however, and the sooner it was done the better. He put his head (and the dog) inside his own front door, called to his wife to have her tea when she liked, and he would be home when he could, and set off by car for Low Abbots.

He was lucky. Miss Smithers, exhausted, had just come back from a picnic. The children had taken sausage rolls, sandwiches and cakes, had drunk water from the wishing well, explored the woods, swum or paddled in the lake, climbed up and rolled down a steep bank several thousand times, and had been brought back dead to the world (announced Miss Smithers, giving this last item the benison of a satisfied smile), and were now all back in their billets. Miss Mortimer had come part of the way, she added, but had found herself too much fatigued to get as far as the wishing well which had been made

the main object of the outing, so Miss Smithers had gone on with the children while Miss Mortimer had sat and knitted under a beech tree. Deliberately, of malice aforethought, and sucks to the wily, lazy, old thing, she added, she had found out (from the Ordnance map she always carried in case they got lost) a different way home, and, for all she knew or cared, Miss Mortimer was under the beech tree, knitting still.

The inspector grinned at this picture, seated himself, hitched the chair slightly forward and asked suddenly :

“ Did Miss French have a pleasant trip on the Saturday and Sunday ? ”

He drew blank. Miss Smithers looked at him with a puzzled frown and said that she supposed he knew what he was talking about, but that it meant nothing at all to her.

“ How should I know ? ” she added. “ What trip ? Which Saturday and Sunday ? ”

“ Why, the two days before you ladies came down here. I understood she took a trip down here on her motor-bike to spy out the lie of the land. ”

“ What rot, ” replied Miss Smithers. “ Why, she hasn’t even got a motor-cycle. Her brother’s got one, and has taken her out occasionally, I believe, but she doesn’t even ride a bike. Got no nerve for London traffic, she says. She did try to learn to drive once, I believe, but had to give it up. The instructor said she’d never pass the test. That was years ago. After all, she’s over thirty. It isn’t likely she’d learn to drive now. ”

“ Why on earth not, young lady ? ” demanded

the inspector. "I'm forty-five, and in my prime, I consider."

"It's different for a man," said Miss Smithers, voicing a stupid but not easily arguable reason. The inspector, who was possessed of the ordinary masculine good opinion of himself which his words conveyed, attempted no argument, however, because he did not see that there was room for one. He merely observed :

"She seems a very self-possessed young lady to me. I shouldn't have thought she couldn't learn to drive."

"I don't believe self-possession has much to do with it. She's quite bold and daring, if that's what you mean. But there *are* people who can't learn to drive. My cousin's one of them, and he used to play hockey for his county."

The inspector agreed that many things were a matter of temperament, and then rose to go.

"Did you think you'd caught Miss French out over the motor-cycling?" asked Miss Smithers, with one of those flashes which the inspector was learning to dread.

"Well," he replied cautiously, "there's an unaccountable story of changed number plates which has come to me by a sort of an accident, miss, and which I should like to have explained away."

"But why should Miss French be involved with number plates, and have to explain them away? I mean, I've just told you——"

"And very much obliged I am, I'm sure, miss. You've saved me a good deal of time, I don't mind telling you. And now, touching upon this little conversation of ours——"

"Oh, I won't repeat it," Miss Smithers assured him. "If French gets what's coming to her, I, for one, shan't grumble. Older teachers can be brutes to younger ones. I've suffered from French in my time."

She gave the inspector a malicious smile which perturbed him, and got up to see him to the front door. Miss French's lodgings were three doors away. Miss Smithers watched at the window all the time she was having the tea and toast which her landlady brought in as soon as the inspector had departed, but by six o'clock in the evening Miss French had not returned with the children from the walk.

VII

The Story Told by the Boy Scout



BY HALF-PAST SEVEN MISS SMITHERS WAS SLIGHTLY uneasy that Miss French had not returned. At eight she went round to Miss Plimmon's lodgings—round the corner by the post office and fifty yards up the lane—to acquaint that lady with the fact of her nervousness, confess about Miss Mortimer and talk over the question of a search party.

"For they must be hopelessly lost," Miss Smithers argued. "She said she was only going just to the top of the hill and back again with her lot, and although she started only about an hour before I got back—or so my landlady told me—they'd surely be home by now!"

"Oh, it isn't dark yet," said Miss Plimmon, who was playing solitaire, the household cat on her knee, and was not going to disturb herself that evening if she could possibly help it. "We could wait another hour. It won't be dark then, either."

"It'll be much too dark to go hunting about on that hill," said Miss Smithers bluntly. "You can break your neck in half a dozen places, and then there's that quarry they're always talking about. I think we ought to go at once and look for them."

"If Miss Mortimer were here she could advise us," Miss Plimmon rather acidly remarked.

"I should think she's come home by now," said Miss Smithers guiltily. "Come round with me and let's see."

"Well, you abandoned her. I think you should go by yourself," objected Miss Plimmon. She stroked the cat with her left hand, and played a little obvious move with her right. Miss Smithers felt herself dismissed, was angry but was much too young to know how to cope with someone of Miss Plimmon's age, so, muttering something dark about people being sports—or rather, not being sports—she went to Miss Mortimer's hotel to discover that the leader of the party had returned and was at dinner.

"And only still at the fish, madam," came back the message from Miss Mortimer at the table, "but would be pleased to see you if you cared to call half an hour later. You could wait in the lounge if you wished."

Miss Smithers, unaccustomed to hotels, stared miserably round what appeared to her to be the splendours of this one, and, at the end of ten minutes in the lounge, compared her wrist-watch with the gilt clock on the marble mantelpiece, rose abruptly, and walked to the village hall where (she remembered with thankfulness) the Boy Scouts would be met together that evening.

There was a cheerful, busy noise coming out through the baize-covered doors, and Miss Smithers, who liked boys and whose two brothers were Scouts, pushed in and found the Scoutmaster, who happened

to be the curate. He was the same pleasant-faced young man with the authoritative voice that she remembered from their first evening. Guides were soon forthcoming, the gymnasium ropes were taken down and coiled by the zealous lads in case they should be needed (as everyone hoped they would be) for a spectacular rescue from the quarry, and in a very short time Miss Smithers was out on the road again surrounded by willing helpers "all yelping like dogs," she explained to the inspector later, "and making me feel a lot better."

They found Miss French and her party. The children were hungry, cold and afraid, but none had dared to return without 'teacher'—a designation, incidentally, which drove its recipient into a frenzy of unexploded annoyance.

Miss French was half-way down the quarry and could not complete her climb. Some of the older girls had made quite plucky attempts to assist her, until her reiterated instructions that nobody else was to attempt to climb down had had their desired effect.

"But surely some of you could have come to the village and told us?" protested Miss Smithers. Millie and Joan had gone, but nothing more had been seen of them, someone reported; and another blurted out that the children had heard there were wolves and bears on the mountains.

"What rot!" said Miss Smithers indignantly. "Who on earth told you that stuff?"

It was the foster-mother at one of the houses, it appeared. Her motive had been to discourage the two children under her care from venturing alone on the hill-side after dusk.

Meanwhile the Scouts, directed and assisted by the Scoutmaster, had given Miss French sufficient guidance and help for her to be able to climb to the top of the quarry. Her thanks were short, and expressed no gratitude for the rescue. She set off for the village, nagging at her charges and compassed about by a posse of Boy Scouts whose idea it seemed to be (and not without reason, thought Miss Smithers) that at any moment Miss French might take it into her head to perform some peculiar set of antics, from the effects of which it would be their duty to extricate her.

Miss Smithers and Miss French said good night rather coldly to one another. Miss French perfunctorily, Miss Smithers sincerely and ardently, thanked the curate for the assistance rendered by himself and his boys. The curate said : " Not at all," very pleasantly, and took his boys back to the Church Hall to dismiss them with the correct Scout ritual, and Miss Smithers was walking back to her lodgings when she was aware of following footsteps.

" Miss," said a boy's voice, " I say, miss ! "

Miss Smithers turned round and said : " Hullo, it's one of you Scouts."

She had supposed that it would be, but the observation made a conversational opening.

" It's the side-car down in the quarry, miss," explained the boy. " I seen it before, and her on it."

" Her ? "

" That other lady—the one we got out of there just now."

" Here, you come along to the police station,

and we'll get the constable to ring up the inspector," said Miss Smithers.

The inspector, who had returned to New Abbots by bus, promised to come 'right over.' He arrived at Miss Smithers's lodgings at nine o'clock. Miss Smithers explained that the boy had gone back to the Church Hall to report to his Scoutmaster, and that he was to go from there to his home to report to his parents. If he did not return within—she consulted her watch—another ten minutes, the inspector would have to interview the Scout at his home.

Within the given time, however, the lad appeared. He had changed out of uniform, and demonstrated himself as a fair, pink-cheeked, round-faced boy of thirteen in a tweed jacket, a pink-striped shirt and dark blue shorts.

"Now, my boy," said the inspector.

"Yes, sir," said the child.

"On your honour as a Scout."

"Very good, sir."

"Right. Sit down, and give me the dope. Fire away."

"It was the morning the holiday girls come down," began the Scout, planting his knees wide apart and gazing at the inspector earnestly. "I was out with Bill Simmons on the Blackneck Road, and we see a motor-cycle and side-car, and Bill collects funny numbers, and this one was AXOTL7, so Bill took a note and just as it passed us it seemed to do a kind of stagger and nearly had the chap off. About eight o'clock, this was."

The inspector made a note.

"After that, sir, he began to shove it, because he hadn't got a spare wheel, we thought. We hadn't heard it blow out, but we thought he must have a puncture, as the magneto hadn't been popping, or anything of that, and old Bill said to me he thought we ought to do a good turn and shove it for him, but the last good turn we done we only got a flea in our ear for, so Bill says no, let him shove it, it wasn't all that far to Morris's place. But the chap didn't go to Morris's place, after all. He branched off up to the hill, the way we came down here to-night, and then, tyre or no tyre, got on again and drove it.

"Then it seemed like he changed his mind, and he sat down as if he was tired, and we came up and said we could get him some help if he liked. So he said, yes, to go and get a chap to bring a tyre-repairing outfit, and pointed to the number and said he betted we couldn't match it.

"Well, Bill went to Morris's, and I stayed with the chap, and he said to me was I a Scout, and would I be able to swear to him again if I saw him. Well, we play Kim's game, sometimes, and I said I thought as how I would, and he said how, and I said, voice, eyes, teeth, hands, walk, height, width, length of arm, length of leg, shoulder slope, smile, length of stride. . . . He said shut up, that was more than enough, and I'd better go after my pal and hurry him up. I would have said hair, but you couldn't see it under his motor-cycling helmet.

"So off I went, and when I got back with young Bert Morris and Bill, the chap was gone. His marks was plain up the hill, so we trailed him up, and

traced him to the edge of the quarry. Then the marks got all mixed up somehow, and we couldn't make out what had happened, so we laid ourself down in the bushes because we could see he hadn't drove on down the road to Gunter's Moor, and he hadn't drove on up the hill. That meant he must have gone by Fiddler's Warren.

"We stayed there a good hour, but there wasn't any sign of the chap, and the tracks didn't look like a puncture, they looked quite firm and good, so we got back then, and had our breakfast."

"Good boy. You've done very well. And you saw no more of the fellow?" said the inspector.

"Well, I dunno," replied the child. "Could a lady look like a man, sir, if she really made out to do it, and covered her hair up?"

"I don't know," said the inspector cautiously. And then, more cautiously still: "It all depends."

"Ah," said the youth, brooding. Then his round face brightened. "That isn't all," he said.

"Ah? I thought not," said the inspector. "Go ahead, boy. What time does your mother expect you home?"

"Oh, this side of midnight, she said." The boy grinned. "Well, next funny thing was when these ladies and girls arrived down here for their holiday."

"One moment," said the inspector. "At what time did you say you saw this motor-cyclist?"

"Oh, eight o'clock, I reckon. About then, anyway. I haven't got a watch, so I can't be exact."

"All right. Go on about the girls."

"Their train came in—we met it to help them tote their luggage—at about four o'clock, I reckon."

That was at New Abbots Station. We took our trek cart over. Well, this motor-cyclist—only it was a lady—got off of the train, and we've seen her about here plenty."

"And yet you think you saw her at eight o'clock that morning? It isn't possible, my boy. She was still in London at eight o'clock in the morning."

"Yes, sir. Maybe it was her brother Bert and me seen by the quarry. Twin brother, must have been, anyway. And then she climbs part-way down the quarry to-night. That's what struck us funny."

The inspector sent him off home, and bade Miss Smithers good night. Then he said abruptly :

"I shall want you up at the station to-morrow, miss, as early as is convenient. What time could you be along?"

"Any time after nine o'clock, I suppose," said Miss Smithers, "but my time is not my own, inspector, you know. I mean, we've got to take these kids out every day, and see they get fresh air and exercise and some sort of programme of amusements."

"Yes. I quite see that, miss. But I must have another interview with you and that lad as soon as possible. Now, miss, you get off to bed. If you'll excuse me saying so, you've had a tiring day, and will be all the better for some sleep."

"I know I look a hag," said Miss Smithers resignedly, "but, you see, I was rather fond of old Francis in a way."

She went off whistling, but sounded more blithe than she felt. Not only grief for the murdered woman was weighing on her mind. She was trying

to remember exactly when and where she had first seen Miss French on the journey down from London, and she found to her growing excitement that she could not actually swear to having seen her before the children had been served with the buns and milk at the station which had been the last the train stopped at.

The inspector took the precaution in the morning of seeing the curate before he interviewed the Boy Scout.

"This lad," he said, naming him. "Is he a dependable sort of youngster?"

Reassured, he drove over to the boy's home and asked to see him. His mother looked a little anxious when she knew who the inspector was, and hoped her boy had not got into any trouble.

"What makes you think he might have?" the inspector sharply enquired.

"I don't think it," she replied. "Only he's always such a good boy I shouldn't like to think he'd been led into anything."

"He's got hold of some information I want, that's all," the inspector admitted. He entered the little parlour, and in a minute the boy appeared, rubbing his hands on the seams of his shorts.

"Been washing up," he explained, "and didn't stop to dry my hands when I heard you wanted me, sir."

"Look here, my lad," said the inspector, "you're quite sure that the morning you saw the motor-cyclist was the actual day on which the party came down from London?"

The boy assured him that he was, and added that

he couldn't be mistaken over the very first day of the holidays. The inspector could agree with this, and accepted it as proof. Then he said :

"This pal of yours—Bert. Go and fetch him if he's at home."

While he was waiting for the boys, he stood in the window looking out and was thinking about the case. He was wondering how, supposing the motor-cyclist to have been Miss French, she had contrived to join the train so as to make it appear that she had come all the way with the party. He also wondered how he was going to prove that she had not. He decided to confront her with the boys first, and then with Kiddons, tell her what he suspected and ask her, straightforwardly, to give him an explanation.

He had settled upon this (although he could see that it would not be an entirely satisfactory course of action) when it occurred to him that, although they had found her clinging to the side of the quarry half-way up, there had been nothing to prevent her reaching the bottom of it and perhaps obliterating tell-tale marks on the side-car or removing identification papers of some sort. It was his own fault, he reflected, if this had happened, since he had let her know, when he met her on the hill, that the quarry was suspect, and that he knew that she knew what the road led to up the hill.

At this juncture another point occurred to him. He wondered exactly why the *Rose and Thorn* had come to be selected as the hotel at which the ladies were to spend their first night. Had it been selected by Miss French as a convenient place for the murder? Had she discovered that it would be a simple matter

to obtain a double room there for herself and her intended victim?

That led to another realisation. It appeared, from the evidence he had collected with so much care, that Miss French had been the only person who had had no say whatever in the choice of bedrooms. The others had done the choosing. She had done nothing but acquiesce in the fact that Miss Francis was to be her room-mate. That it was coincidence which gave into her power the very person she intended to murder, the inspector could not believe. Actually, if one knew anything of the psychology of the five women who had slept at the *Rose and Thorn* that night—and by this time the inspector flattered himself that he knew a good deal about it—even that of the murdered woman—it was apparent that the settlement of the rooms was bound to turn out as Miss French would wish, if only because she had the strongest character, so that her preferences would have been consulted, even in her absence from the discussion.

First, there could have been no question but that Miss Mortimer would, in any case, have been given the single room. She was, by a good many years, the oldest member of the party, and her position on the Council, and her comparative affluence, placed her apart from the others. Secondly, neither Miss Plimmon nor the crudely youthful Miss Smithers would have been approved of as a partner by the intelligent and self-assured Miss French, even had either of them been willing to share with her, which their own evidence had made it clear they would not have been.

So far, so obvious, thought the inspector, pleased at having settled to his own satisfaction a point which had been troubling his mind. Before he could get further with his thesis he saw the two boys at the gate. As soon as they came in, and had shut the door, he tackled Bert, a stolid, 'poker'-faced boy, without preamble.

"So you saw a solo motor-bike on the hill on the first Monday morning of the holidays?"

"No, sir. Combination," said the boy. He drew out a note-book. Here you are, sir. All particulars. I always keep a record of car and motor-bike numbers, and I always add a description."

The inspector took the note-book, and there in neat, plain, childish writing, was as exact a description as any policeman could have given. The inspector handed back the note-book, picked up his cap from the seat of a chair, and said :

"Come on. Let your mothers know you'll be back in about an hour."

"I'm out for the morning, sir. I've done all my jobs at home," said Bert. The inspector did not reply, but set a mountaineer's pace up the hill and did not slacken until they had reached the lip of the quarry.

"Come on," he said again, and began to scramble down.

"That's the side-car all right," said Bert, pulling back the bush which almost hid it.

"If he says so, you can take it it is," said the boy whom the inspector had interviewed on the previous evening, and whose name turned out to be Harold. "Bert's an expert. He couldn't be mistaken."

The inspector was searching the inside of the side-car again.

"And the lady?" he enquired.

"No doubt about her, either, sir," said Bert.

"Or else it was her brother. But he wasn't any bigger than her."

"See his hair, by any chance?"

"No, sir. He was wearing one of those caps like airmen's caps. You couldn't see a thing except just his face."

"Do you think he was the murderer, sir?" asked Harold.

"Who said anything about the murderer?" demanded the inspector. "You boys must keep your mouths shut about all this, otherwise you chuck a spanner properly into the works. You're Scouts. I should be able to depend on you."

"Yes, sir," said the boys; and, it may be remarked in passing, they were as good as their word.

"One more thing," said the inspector, when the three of them had managed to scramble to the top, "I want you to give me an exact description of the arrival of those London children at the station, and tell me all about how they went to the Church Hall and what happened there before they went to their lodgings. Don't leave out anything. I don't know what's important and what isn't until it all comes out and I can sort it. Get me?"

They said they did, and he let them tell the tale, as it were, in chorus, supplementing and correcting one another's information and checking one another's memories and impressions of the scene. Their sense of observation, naturally acute in children, had been

trained by the organisation to which they belonged, and they made clear and valuable witnesses.

"We broke up on the Friday afternoon," said Harold, "and had our usual Scout meeting Friday night, and Mr. Rearden told us about them girls coming down here for their holiday, 'though we knowed about it because my mother was going to have one at our house, and Bert's married sister she was going to have one, too."

"Mr. Rearden asked us to help get their things up from the station in our trek cart," contributed Bert, "so our troop we picked out who should go and who should be on duty at headquarters——"

"That's the Church Hall, really, only it's headquarters when it's the Scouts," interpolated Harold.

"And me and Harold was to go with the trek cart, and then do what we could at headquarters afterwards. Well, we goes along to the station with three more of our chaps, and——"

"And we see this lady we pulled up out of the quarry last night——"

"And I say to Harold that it's the same bloke we seen on the motor-cycle combination that morning——"

"Only we reckoned it couldn't be her, because it was a man on the combination, as we thought——"

"So, anyway, we never said nothing, and we had to wait while they all come out the barrier with their luggage, and only one chap in shirt-sleeves carrying anything for them, and then we took all the biggest cases and that, and one little girl she had a kit-bag, with her and her sister's clothes, so we put that on——"

"Only it kep' on falling off, and in the end we had to carry it, and the girls and the ladies, they was fetched off in cars, so most of 'em was there at the hall by the time we got up there with the trek cart, and we didn't know what to do next, so——"

"So I got hold of Mr. Rearden and asked him, and he said dump the stuff at the back of the hall and he hoped it was properly labelled and we looked and it was——"

"So then we went round and looked at all the labels round the little girls' necks, and told 'em where we put their baggage, and then we got the tea urns, and fetched up more bre'n butter and stopped the little 'uns crying——"

"And Jim Eaves broke a jug of milk all over his uniform——"

"And then the ladies came, them as lives here and was going to billet the little girls, and we was kep' busy running the trek cart out to the houses and things, because——"

"Because although the little girls all went to the Baptist Hall to be medicalled——"

"To be what?" said the inspector.

"You know, sir, pass the doctor."

"Oh, ah, yes. Carry on."

"And get all their names and addresses writ down where they was going, *we* knew, and the ladies knew, there wouldn't be any bother, so the ladies said to take each lot of the girls' luggage and leave it in the porch or just inside the front door——"

"Or by the dog-kennel, one told *me*, and I said did the dog bite and she laughed a good bit and said I'd see when I got there——"

"And so when we got back it was getting on for dark, and they was all fixed up where they was to go except the lady helpers what came down with them."

"So one of the ladies come up and said did us Scouts know anywhere they could go just for the one night——"

"And some of us said no, but Billy Band said there was a temperance hotel in New Abbots, and there was still time to get the bus to go back there, but one of the ladies said: 'Not temperance, I'm going to be carried up to bed to-night if never before or after'——"

"And two of the ladies said: 'Hush, not in front of these boys'——"

"And Ted Ingham give a laugh, so the other lady what hadn't said nothing at all said we better go away and give us a shilling for our Camp Fund——"

"We reckoned it must have been her that was murdered because we haven't never seen her again——"

"And then her what said about not temperance said she'd heard about a hotel called the *Rose and Thorn*, and asked us the way to get to it, so we showed 'em, and then we finished up and went off home."

"And which of the ladies did not want a temperance hotel?" enquired the inspector.

"The young 'un," said honest Bert. "Her them girls calls Miss Smithers."

"And who selected the *Rose and Thorn*, then, boys? Not Miss Smithers? You must think that

over again. Now, then! It couldn't have been Miss Smithers. Which one of them was it?"

But he could not shake their evidence. It was clear, from what they said—and he found it impossible not to believe them—that Miss Smithers (and not Miss French) had selected the *Rose and Thorn*.

The inspector dismissed the boys, and wondered how best to take the wind out of Miss Smithers' sails with this perturbing, unnecessary, redundant, annoying little item of information.

For, said he to himself, as he walked up and down the parlour of Constable Brownlow's neat house whilst awaiting Miss Smithers' arrival, if Miss Smithers had selected the hotel, what had Miss French been doing with her motor-cycle combination on the Monday morning? Surely if that visit of hers to Low Abbots had had any meaning at all, the meaning was that she had come down in advance of her intended victim to discover a suitable setting for the crime.

Worried and puzzled, he pulled out his notebook, re-read Miss Smithers' evidence, scowled at it, and at the foot of the page wrote one or two pertinent and sharp-edged questions in the script which seemed too neat and small to come from his clumsy, thick fingers.

Then he looked out of the window, and, at the end of half an hour, was anxious enough about the young lady to stroll as far as the gate. He looked up and down the lane, but there was still no sign of her. He cursed her, but was worried, nevertheless, by her non-appearance. Her landlady was not on the telephone, otherwise he would have rung her.

In the end he was sufficiently troubled in mind to go along to her lodgings, knock at the door and ask for her.

She herself answered the knock.

"Oh, inspector!" she said. "I'm really most awfully sorry, but— Look here, I mean, will you come in? I've got a visitor I think you ought to meet."

She hesitated a second, and then added :

"It's Miss Francis' husband. He says his name's Waterbury, and he's in an awful stew. He's been abroad on business, and he's only just heard about the death."

"On business, eh?" said the inspector. "I want to see you, too, Miss Smithers, you know. You needn't think you've got out of it!"

She giggled at his solemn forefinger. It was wagged in her face with what she seemed to regard as humorous intent. Then her face changed.

"He's in an awful state, inspector," she said. "Do come and see him, won't you?"

"How did he come to know that you were staying here?" demanded the inspector, stepping, nevertheless, over the threshold and on to the mat in the hall.

"He'd got my name off pat, as though Marion—as though Miss Francis—had mentioned me to him at some time. So someone directed him here, because, of course, I mean, everybody in this bally village knows where we live by now. Be decent to him, inspector. Poor man! I feel quite sorry for him. He says he can't understand it. He didn't think she had any enemies at all. He says it's all

a mystery. But he seems in a frightful stew. He says it's all come as such a frightful shock, especially as he hasn't been back in England more than a day and a half."

"Wonder how he got to hear of the murder, then?" was the inspector's comment. "The papers have quite given up any interest in the case, and will do, until we resume the inquest, I take it. Where is this man?"

Miss Smithers, full of goodwill, curiosity and excitement, led him to her little sitting-room.

"Here he is," she said. "Mr. Waterbury, this is Inspector Jervis, the policeman in charge of the case. He's an awful sport. You can tell him everything. I should if I were you."

VIII

The Story Told by the Husband



MR. WATERBURY WAS A SMALL, NEAT, ANXIOUS-looking man of thirty-six or so. His hair was neatly parted and neatly brushed, his old but tidy waterproof covered a neat, threadbare suit, and his boots, carefully patched, had been carefully cleaned.

The inspector, confronted at such short notice with a person who had to be classed (whatever the inspector's theories might be) among the persons suspected of the murder, returned his deprecating smile with a genial one and said, in a voice too loud for the room, and so much too loud for the nervous little man before him that he gave a shudder of fright before he could respond to the question :

"Well, Mr. Waterbury, what are you doing in these parts?"

"I—well, I—look here, inspector, it's all so terrible," Mr. Waterbury replied. He glanced at Miss Smithers in order to gain a little confidence, but she, waving her hand, disappeared, and closed the door behind her.

"Sit down, Mr. Waterbury," said the inspector. "And take your time. What do you know about this business?"

"Nothing. That is to say—nothing," Mr. Waterbury replied.

"Come, now," said the inspector. He leaned forward and tapped the reluctant witness on the knee.

"I only heard about it the day before yesterday," Mr. Waterbury commenced. "Of course, we hadn't lived together for over five years, inspector, but I thought it was due to poor Marion to come and see if there was anything I could do. I feel terribly shocked—terribly."

"Shocked and grieved," amended the inspector. But the nervous little man would have none of that.

"Not exactly grieved, inspector. No. As I say, we hadn't lived together— Not that I had anything against poor Marion. We didn't just hit it off—that's all I can say."

"So you came down here and hit *her* off," suggested the inspector. "Right. Come across with all the particulars. There *might* be extenuating circumstances, and you never know with juries."

Exactly what effect he expected this speech to produce it is not at all easy to see, but whatever it was, the effect that did result took him altogether by surprise.

"Me?" said the nervous little man. "Well, mind you, I'm not saying I didn't, inspector. And I'm not admitting I did. It's up to you."

"What do you mean—up to me?" demanded the inspector, flabbergasted at the way his ironical question had been answered. The little man shook his head.

"I'm pretty miserable," he said. "I'm not sure

I wouldn't much sooner be hanged and have done with it. I've not made much of a success of life, and that's the naked truth. And quarrelling with poor Marion was the worst day's work I ever did. Gone to seed I have, these last few years, no mistake. No, I leave it to you. Pin it on me, and I'll go quiet." He held out his wrists as he spoke, under the mistaken impression that the inspector had handcuffs concealed on his person and could produce them the instant that a suitable subject presented itself for arrest. The inspector stared at him, and then said slowly :

"Never mind about arresting you. It'll help me a lot, though, I fancy, if you'd give me an account of what you were up to last Sunday, Monday and Tuesday."

"Sunday : Blackpool. Monday : Carlisle. Tuesday : Glasgow," replied the witness tolerantly.

"Can you prove it? I thought you'd been abroad."

"I guess I can, inspector." He produced three cards. "If you'd care to ring these numbers . . ."

"That'll do later." The inspector pocketed the cards. "Now tell me what you can about your wife."

"My late wife," said Mr. Waterbury softly, as though the adjective gave him a certain amount of satisfaction. "Well, she was a school teacher. Do you know any teachers, inspector?" He asked the question in a mild and deprecating fashion which aroused all the inspector's suspicion."

"A few," he responded. "Why?"

"A bit heavy in the hand, inspector. Not—

well, not what I'd call romantic sort of girls. At least, poor Marion never made our marriage romantic."

"Takes two to do that," said the inspector, who had begun to dislike his new informant. Mr. Waterbury, sensing dislike in the tone, wriggled unhappily, and then thought it better to agree. "And it must be a dog's life," added the inspector severely. Mr. Waterbury again agreed.

"Passing over all that," he went on, "I became unfortunate in business. Luckily Marion had never taken her superannuation money out of the profession. Teachers call it the profession, just like stage people do, you know, inspector. We moved. We'd been living in Leeds, which has its own Education Committee and inspectors, and not such a high salary scale as London. After we quarrelled, Marion came to London, and got a job there under her maiden name, which, so far as the profession was concerned, she had never dropped."

"I see. Teachers, of course, must resign if they marry, mustn't they?"

"*Women* teachers, yes," responded the witness. "Marion belonged to a Union which tried to fight against it, but people are horribly prejudiced. They don't mind women going as charwomen if they're married. And, of course, as long as they remain in private practice, they'll put up with, and in some cases even welcome, women doctors. But the teachers, you see, are neither fish nor fowl. They're educated and paid above their natural station—most of them—and they can't seem to find their natural level. And the education authorities take

advantage of them, you'd be surprised—the pin-pricks and keeping the tabs on' em one way and another. It's a dog's life, in spite of the pay, as you said yourself, just now. Or was it me? And of course, as poor Marion often said, no particular prospects, after all, and always paid by seniority, never by merit. Although who on earth can assess the merit of a teacher, goodness only knows. It isn't like a doctor—kill or cure."

The inspector agreed, and tactfully drew his attention to the matter in hand.

"Oh, ah, yes. I was forgetting," the little man exclaimed. "Sorry, I'm sure. Only I've heard Marion say such things so often they're part of—what do they call it?"

"Well, we were happy enough in Leeds for a year and a half. Then we started having rows. Not about anything much——"

"Not about other women, for example?" suggested the inspector. He could not believe that the anxious little man was capable of attracting 'other women,' and yet—— He stared at him, and thought: 'After all, if he could attract a girl like this Miss Francis, he must have been capable of attracting other girls. Funny fancies some women take, I must say.'

Mr. Waterbury's blush faded, but as he had not answered the question the inspector decided to press it. He repeated the query in a slightly different way, and with a good deal more seriousness.

"Come, now. Did you give your wife cause for jealousy?"

"Of course not. It was nothing like that,

inspector. It was just her excuse to get rid of me, I believe. You see, inspector"—the inspector began to realise that the little man was not entirely sober—"the fact is, between you and me, I've been a bit of a—well, not a failure, exactly——" Funny, thought the inspector, how even the worst down-and-outs are chary of believing that they could not do almost anything with their lives if they really wanted to—"but, you see, she'd always earned more money than I could seem to get hold of, Marion had, and she used to twit me with it, and it really wasn't hardly fair, inspector, because I never had education, not to speak of, whereas it was lavished on her."

Funny, thought the inspector, what widely different opinions people of more or less the same social class could hold about some things. He recalled Miss French's bitter views upon the subject of a teacher's education.

"Do you know Miss French?" he asked at random. The question not only took Mr. Waterbury by surprise, it appeared to frighten him so much as to render him speechless. For some moments he stared at the inspector as he might have stared at an octopus whose tentacles were beginning to close upon his limbs. His mouth worked and his Adam's apple wobbled distressfully, in a manner which, the inspector realised, would have seemed very funny on a comic film, but did not seem so at all in the present circumstances. At last he got the words out.

"Well, I can't say I haven't, inspector. I mean—any friend of the wife's—of poor Marion's—

naturally, one of her colleagues—had her to tea and asked me to manage to be in, and——”

“ Oh ? So Mrs. Waterbury didn’t object to her colleagues knowing that she was married ? ”

“ Oh—as to that—poor Marion always introduced me as her fiancé, not her husband, and explained me always being on the premises by me being the landlady’s son, which, indeed, of course, actually I was at the time she married me. I mean, that’s how we met. Always a mistake to throw young people into one another’s company. Something always comes of it, sooner or later.

“ There was Marion studying up for her B.A.—she never got it, but she used to study up of an evening—and there was me doing the cross-word or perhaps the football pools, and mother in the kitchen with the wireless on, which neither Marion or me could abide, and that’s why we used to spend our evenings together when she wasn’t out at her lectures at the Leeds University—and before I knew it had happened, I had proposed.”

“ And she accepted you ? ”

“ You said it, inspector, although with provisos, mind you.”

“ With what ? ”

“ You know—hedged it about with me having to promise not to stand in the way of her job or her degree, and not to let on we were married to people outside, in case she should get the sack. She said she couldn’t live on my money, she must have culture and beauty—those was her words—culture and beauty, and both of ’em costs more money than *you* will have to spare, she tells me, and I agrees.

I was all for her to keep on at the teaching. I didn't want to give up my pipe and my pint, nor a bit of betting I done, and the pictures now and again, and fried fish and chips for supper, and football matches Saturday afternoons. There's not all that pleasure in marriage you want to give up everything else besides. At least, I didn't think so, and Marion she was all for me having my time to myself because then she could get on with her degree, although later she did do office work for a bit."

"I don't really see why she married you," said the inspector, who was, however, beginning to see quite a number of other things. "And, anyway, why did you both leave Leeds?"

"Marion got the chance of a job in London. Better salary scale than Leeds, so she went for the interview and got it, and then she give me the choice to go with her or stay with mother."

"Then why *did* she marry you?" persisted the inspector, not troubling to consider how tactful a question he was asking.

"She wanted a baby," said Mr. Waterbury slowly. "Of course, she was going on thirty, and while the war was on we didn't think we better venture because of the air raids and things, but then we thought p'raps we would, but it didn't seem likely we'd have one, and Marion was ever so disappointed. I reckon that was the back of her wanting us to separate."

"Let me get this clear," said the inspector. "This baby she would have had, then, if she'd lived, would not have been your child?"

Mr. Waterbury did not reply. The inspector,

glancing at him, was surprised, and uncomfortably moved, by the fact that his eyes were full of tears.

"So you both knew Miss French?" he added, after a slight and very awkward pause. Mr. Waterbury nodded, then got command of himself again and answered.

"That's right. But with me it was only just the once she came to tea. Poor Marion knew her quite well, you might say."

"All right. There's something funny somewhere, but no doubt we'll soon square it up. Now then, Mr. Waterbury, I want an exact account of all your movements—and mind, I can check you up at the London end, so don't start telling me fairy tales or you'll find yourself properly in Queer Street—all your movements from the Saturday after the schools broke up on the Friday, to the Tuesday morning on which we discovered the body."

"I don't need to tell no lies, and a good job too, as I see it now, though I didn't think I'd ever live to be glad of it. I've told you a lot of lies, inspector, I'm afraid, through trying to keep it dark. I haven't been to Glasgow and all that. I've spent the last fourteen days in quod, inspector. Fourteen days without the option. Drunk and disorderly. I bashed a policeman, inspector."

"You *what*?" said the inspector, with pardonable horror and amazement. "Good lord! I seem to have overlooked your possibilities."

"It's true enough," said Mr. Waterbury. "It begun with a bet on Derby Day——"

"But that was weeks ago!"

"Ah, I know all about that. But that's where

it begun, and I got in bad company, inspector. I *did* arrange with those fellows to alibi me, it's true, but if I'm to be accused of murder, I'm coming across with the truth. Fourteen days without the option it was, and fourteen days I done, finishing the day before yesterday."

IX

The Story Told by the Headmistress



"YOU SEE, MISS," SAID THE INSPECTOR PATIENTLY, "it's my job to get the business cleared up."

"I am sure you have all my goodwill and sympathy," said the well-dressed, sharp-eyed, alert and curiously repellent woman on the divan. "However, since you *are* here, and the girl was on my staff, I suppose I'd better answer your questions. But, mind, I take no responsibility."

"Of course not, miss. The responsibility is mine, and I'm sorry to butt in on your holiday. I'll be as quick as I can. Now, miss, I know you ladies don't like to own to such things, but there are always what we'll call wheels within wheels when you get a number of ladies working together at a job that's really rather trying. I want you to tell me about any little quarrels or disagreements——"

The well-dressed woman rose to her feet and looked contemptuously at the long, middle-aged figure in the arm-chair ; looked at the grizzled head, the drooping shoulders, the thick boots, clumsy hands and heavy watchchain ; but said nothing. It was this gift of being able to look like that and say nothing which gave her the power to manage women

and girls, the inspector supposed, looking up and giving her back an unimpressed glance before he continued, in an unaffected voice :

"Or anything more serious, of course. I am anxious to get a further insight into one or two things I've got a line on."

Finding that the contempt and the silence were not weapons which easily penetrated this masculine hide, the headmistress replied in icy tones which were marred by more than a suspicion of a Cockney accent :

"My staff *never* quarrel. I have never known a more devoted, and, I may say, loyal, set of women."

"I'm sorry, miss, but that won't do at all," said the inspector flatly. "I have positive information that there *were* disagreements—we needn't call them quarrels if you don't like that word. As for loyalty, by which, I take it, you mean they backed you up in the job, that's neither here nor there at the moment. So if you can't tell me what goes on in the staff-room among your ladies——"

He had touched the right note. The headmistress gave a twitch like a horse teased by flies.

"Of course I know what goes on, inspector. And since things appear to have been said, perhaps you'll let me know what you've heard, and I'll confirm or deny it."

"I know it isn't a satisfactory way of doing things, miss," said the inspector quietly and modestly, "but I believe I've got my case complete if I can only get a bit more of what I generally like to call jury-evidence. Something tangible, miss, is

what juries like. Well, now, your collaboration might be absolutely invaluable, see what I mean? You know these ladies better than anybody else. You see them every day, both when they know you're there and when they don't."

The headmistress opened her mouth to refute what appeared to her to be an accusation, but the inspector went blandly on, as though the last remark were not offensive. His first question, however, considering what had gone before, was an unexpected one.

"Now, miss, what would you say were the main characteristics of the dead woman? What was she like at her job?"

"Miss Francis was a very good teacher. She pleased inspectors, took proper notice of any suggestions I had to make for the improvement of her teaching methods and her discipline, and always accepted my criticisms in a proper spirit. Her teaching in arithmetic was rather—not weak; I won't tolerate that in my school—but it was not quite up to the standard I like to set. Her English work, however, was quite good, and she was a successful teacher of needlework. She was not the kind of teacher who brings parents up to the school; I do not remember ever being bothered like that; and, of course, the Committee liked her until this unfortunate occurrence."

"You mean her murder, miss?"

"No, no. That wretched baby!"

"Oh, yes. That brings me to this point: How long had you known she was going to have this baby?"

"Well, I had been rather anxious for most of last term, but I hardly cared to approach the subject. I tried to find out in a roundabout way, of course——"

"Of course," echoed the inspector, who thought he had seldom encountered a more detestable young woman, as he compared her mentally with more than half a dozen decent, kindly, hard-working, selfless head teachers, men and women, who were numbered among his acquaintances.

"But nobody spilled any beans?" he said aloud. He made a note as he said it, and then looked up at her. "And yet they must have known."

"I can't really believe they did. I'm sure I could have got it out of one or two of them. Not Miss French, of course. If she weren't such a clever, intelligent woman I should get rid of her, but she's a valuable member of the staff, and so I keep her on. She impresses people. But, of course, she's really no teacher."

"But I didn't know it was in your power, miss, to dismiss the teachers if they don't happen to suit?"

A little smile of the utmost cruelty flitted across the woman's face as she replied in an off-hand tone:

"Oh, it's easy enough to put a teacher in a position where she feels it might be better to ask the Committee for a transfer. No teacher's work is perfect. It isn't possible that it should be. And by judicious insistence upon its weak spots one can soon give the teacher an impression that she might do somewhat better somewhere else."

"Oh, as easy as that?" said the inspector. He looked at her thoughtfully. "You've only got to make 'em miserable enough, and break their spirit enough, and they take themselves off without trouble. And very nice, too!"

"One has to protect oneself. The reputation of the headmistress with the Committee really rests with the teachers, and it is most important for us to be *in* with the committee."

The inspector abandoned the ethics of these queer relationships, and addressed another question about Miss Francis.

"Did Miss Francis volunteer for the job of taking these children for their country holiday, or was she forced into it in any way?"

"Oh, the helpers are all volunteers," replied the headmistress glibly.

"Ah, yes, I understand that, miss. But sometimes volunteers need a little bit of prodding to come forward. Was Miss Francis really keen on the stunt?"

"If by the stunt you mean the holiday—yes, she was. In fact, she came to me and asked to go."

"Look here, miss, I'm bound to tell you you may have to make that statement in court."

"In court?"

"Well, the poor lady was murdered, miss."

"I am prepared to make it in court."

"It'll be on oath, miss, remember."

"Are you suggesting that I'm lying, inspector?"

The inspector admired this boldness. There was something more in the little bully and toady, then,

than he had thought. He replied sedately and with some respect :

"By no means, miss. I was only testing the statement, as it were. You see, miss, I've pretty well established that the thing was a put-up job. There was nothing sudden and unpremeditated about it. It was carefully planned, and cleverly done, on the whole. Whoever did it knew that Miss Francis was going on this country holiday with the children, knew what place she was going to, and even knew the hotel where she stopped the night. Which all brings me to this, miss, and again I must give you the warning that you may have to say it in court. Was any mention made of an hotel at this end? Did any of the ladies, for instance, put forward a suggestion as to where they should spend that first night?"

"Certainly not, inspector. I can be quite positive on that. None of them knew the place at all."

"Thank you, miss. That's very satisfactory. It fits in with what I've discovered. Now, miss, I understand that you came down in your car to see the party off on the buses."

"Yes, I did. Unfortunately I arrived very late at the hall, as I called in at school first to speak to the caretaker about any correspondence which might arrive during the holidays and to telephone the office. Still, I felt I must just go along and see them off."

"How many of them did you see, miss?"

"Why, all of them, of course. What a curious question, inspector!"

"Not so curious, miss, if you'll allow me. Look here, miss, I have positive evidence that you *couldn't* have seen them all off. I'm referring to the staff and the helpers, not to the children. Now, miss, I challenge you positively. Which of the staff and the helpers did you see?"

"Well, one of the helpers, of course, I don't know at all," said the headmistress, at last thrown slightly out of her stride. "I mean, it's no good saying positively I saw a person I don't even know, is it? My impression is that I *did* see her—a short, fat, lumpy, rather dough-faced sort of woman, in a black hat and coat with a light mauve umbrella, a large, navy-blue handbag and eye-glasses."

"I congratulate you, miss. You saw her all right," said the inspector. He made another note. "Now the others, miss."

"You wish me to describe them to you, inspector, as proof that I really saw them?"

"Well, miss, it's a pretty good test, it seems, and I wouldn't dream of troubling you like this if it wasn't of the greatest importance. I must say you have an eye for detail I wish I could train into my men."

The headmistress visibly thawed. Her eyes brightened, her tight, little, bad-tempered mouth began to smile. She must have been a very pretty girl before her profession set the mark of the beast upon her, thought the inspector in his fanciful, sentimental, intuitive, very Welsh way.

"I saw Miss Francis," she said. "She was dressed in a twiced costume of a greyish mixture,

wore a dark blue felt hat which looked rather heavy, I thought, for the summer, and carried a brown suitcase and a green-checked waterproof. I saw Miss Smithers. She was in a summer frock of some sort—I did not remark the pattern, but the predominant colours were blue and white. She had no hat—although I may say that I have particularly requested the staff to wear hats as an example to the children—and her luggage was on her back in the form of a rucksack. She also carried a waterproof, but hers was plain fawn."

"Anyone else, miss?" the inspector asked, as she paused.

"Well, I only caught the merest glimpse of Miss French, because I particularly wanted to see Miss Mortimer who had so *very* kindly offered to go as escort to the party——"

"And is on the Education Committee," thought the inspector. He made another note. "You did see Miss French, then?" he asked. The headmistress looked at him enquiringly.

"Why, of course, inspector," she said. "She was on the same bus as Miss Mortimer."

"I see, miss. Thank you very much. You've been very helpful indeed."

"Well, if that's all," said the headmistress rising to dismiss him. But the inspector, firmly seated, said abruptly:

"Are you prepared to swear you saw Miss French that morning?"

"Why, yes, of course, inspector!"

"Then please sit down again, miss, and tell me this: If you saw Miss French on the bus that

morning, how could she also have been riding up the hill outside Low Abbots on a motor-cycle?"

"But she hasn't got a motor-cycle! I should not permit one of my staff to have a motor-cycle. It wouldn't be good for the children!"

"I'm sorry, miss," said the inspector obstinately, "but I'm afraid there's no doubt about it. I have at least three witnesses."

"But, inspector, this is terrible! Are you really suggesting——?"

"Yes, miss, I certainly am. There seems to be very little doubt. In the face of what I've just told you, are you still prepared to swear you saw our lady on the bus that morning?"

The headmistress's colour mounted. Her eyes were furious.

"Yes, I am!" she said. "Not one of my staff would ever do such a thing! My staff don't murder one another! The idea is ridiculous; fantastic! Of course I saw her; and I should tell the Lord Chief Justice himself so if he were here!"

"I admire your spirit, miss," said the inspector sorrowfully, unwillingly, but with truth. "But I advise you to think it over. I don't really think your Committee would think too well of a lady in your position getting seven years in quod for perjury. It's great stuff, miss, but, believe me, it's a mistake. Why should you try to shield a dirty murderess? Because that's exactly what she is, and there can't be any doubt about it."

"I don't believe it!" said the headmistress. "I don't like Miss French, inspector. In fact, I detest

her. She is very difficult indeed, and much too independent to make a success of the profession. But the idea of her as a murderess is absurd ! ” She stood tense and straight, watching him go. She did not attempt to see him out or to get him to modify his words. She stood there for nearly five minutes after he had gone, and, with clenched hands and one tooth caught in her lower lip, said fiercely, desperately and angrily, over and over, to herself :

“ Did I see her ? Did I see her, or not ? Did I see her ? Did I see her—or not ! ”

“ Poor, nerve-ridden little vixen,” thought the inspector pitifully. “ But she can’t pull that yarn on me ! She saw the others all right, but she don’t know herself whether she saw that beauty French. Too busy catching the eye of the powers that be, although she’d had a row with them ! What a life ! ”

This diagnosis of her case would have surprised and shocked the headmistress, who thought herself godlike, beyond pity, believed that nothing escaped her notice and felt herself to be entirely independent of God, man and the members of the Education Committee.

But the inspector, to her surprise and displeasure, had not finished. He popped back again at the end of five minutes and said :

“ Now, look here, miss, I want to know exactly what you’d have done when the time came for this baby—Miss Francis’s baby—to be born. I suppose you had made some plans ? ”

“ Certainly, inspector.”

"Very good, miss. What were they?"

"Well, inspector, I thought that when the time came for her to stay away, I would suggest that she sent in a medical certificate for nervous breakdown, and got it renewed as often as was necessary. We have to send in a first certificate after two days, you know."

"I see, miss. And a certificate for nervous breakdown would be readily obtainable by a teacher?"

"Good heavens, yes!" She almost laughed at that.

"And could she depend on her doctor to do that much for her, miss?"

"She could depend on mine! He is averse to the rule that married teachers should resign their posts."

"Do you agree with him, miss?"

"No."

"Yet you would have sunk your principles for the sake of one of your staff? I call that generous, miss."

"Well," said the headmistress, hesitating between honesty and the desire to obtain praise, however much undeserved, "I didn't want to lose Miss Francis. She was, as I said before, a very loyal member of the staff."

"Backed you up, miss? I understand. We can all do with people like that. Very useful and kind of soothing. So your doctor would have given her the certificate to say she was suffering from a nervous breakdown, and wouldn't have mentioned her condition?"

"He certainly wouldn't have mentioned the fact that she was going to have a baby, if that's what you mean, inspector."

"Bit diddly, miss, for a doctor."

"Nonsense. Doctors have their prejudices, like everybody else, and my doctor has a prejudice in favour of babies and against arbitrary rulings by governing bodies."

"Very well put, miss, if you'll allow me to say so." He made another note. "And you think perhaps you could have got away with it?"

"I don't know. I should have tried. And if it didn't come off, it wouldn't have affected me much. I could always say I hadn't the slightest idea about the baby."

"Wouldn't the Committee have thought that rather strange, miss?"

"Naturally not. Not in open meeting, anyhow. I should have said that, not expecting my unmarried teachers to have illegitimate children, naturally, I had not noticed Miss Francis's condition."

"I see, miss. And they would have accepted that? Quite so. Now, miss, I want a truthful answer this time, because I'm not asking on behalf of the Committee, and I don't suppose you'll have to say it in court. Had you any idea that Miss Francis was a married woman?"

"I knew she was," responded the headmistress immediately. "She wore her wedding ring on a thin gold chain round her neck, bore the mark of it on her finger and was, in any case, not at all the sort of person to have an illegitimate child, as I appreciated perfectly well. But that

wouldn't have done her very much good with the Committee."

"Thank you very much for a straightforward answer, miss," said the inspector gratefully. "May I ask how you knew she wore the wedding ring round her neck?"

"Certainly. It was the last Christmas that we had a school party—just before the war, in fact. I pushed open the door of the teachers' wash-lobby, thinking that no one was there, and Miss Francis was washing. She had taken off her blouse, and the ring and chain were lying beside the wash-basin. She immediately dropped her towel over them, of course, but I had seen, and when it became obvious that a child was to be expected, I remembered what I had seen, and taxed her with it, and she agreed that she was married, and asked me what I was going to do about it."

"And you gave her your advice about the nervous breakdown, miss?"

"And advised her to see my doctor. Certainly."

"But wouldn't the doctor land himself in Queer Street, giving a wrong certificate?" asked the inspector.

"Why should he? The certificate would be perfectly in order. A doctor does not have to mention in a certificate *all* the reasons which are keeping his patient from following her employment. He often chooses the major reason, and in Miss Francis's case there is no doubt that her nerves were in a bad state."

"Indeed, miss?"

"Yes. She told me about it. Her doctor had

told her husband that it would probably mean a Cæsarean operation if she were to be delivered of the child, and the husband—drunken beast !—had let it out to her in a quarrel they had.”

“And she dreaded the operation ?” asked the inspector.

X

The Story Told by the Guard



THE LIBRARY WINDOWS OPENED ON TO A VERY beautiful garden. The chief constable, a white-haired man of fifty-six (he had been white-haired since he was thirty) fully appreciated the beauty of the garden, and was contemplating it even while he was in the act of clicking his tongue at the news the inspector brought him.

The inspector, too, appreciated gardens. He had a very jolly little one of his own behind his house at the edge of the town, but the chief constable had more ground, more money and, the inspector supposed, more leisure to devote to the care and the love of his flowers.

The scent, especially of the roses, now in their second flowering, came in at the open french windows, and ought to have made the inspector's tale appear more sordid, horrible and pitiful than it actually did ; for, as a matter of fact, neither man connected the flowers and the story at all. There was no association whatever in either of their minds between the flowers and the story, or the scent of roses and the no less obvious smell of murder and blood.

"So there it is, sir," concluded the inspector, who was of the opinion, based upon experience, that his superior had heard perhaps half of what he had been saying and had understood and absorbed about half of that. "So I thought I ought to try and see the guard and find out whether she was actually on the train at all."

"Would the guard know? It was a pretty full train, I should imagine," observed the chief constable, disproving at a single breath the inspector's theory that he neither knew, cared nor understood the first thing about the case.

"Well, sir," explained the inspector, examining with great care and interest the cigarette he had just accepted out of a silver box, "perhaps you remember I mentioned in my report that the guard went the length of the train to find out who had pulled the communication cord?"

"Oh, ah, yes, to be sure," the chief constable agreed. "Mrs. Egerton Castle will have to be pruned more severely next time," he was thinking. "All over the place. Lovely things, *sécatcurs*." He looked up and caught the inspector's eye. "Lovely things, *sécatcurs*," he said aloud. "Oh, ah, yes, sorry. The guard went all along the train. . . . But he couldn't really have done that, you know, Jervis. As soon as he found out the culprit—one of those little *evacuces*—I mean, country-holiday children—wasn't it? Stood on the lavatory seat or something, what? Very pains-taking, you know. Well-brought-up youngster, what?"

"I couldn't say, sir," said the inspector, finding

the chief constable, as usual, rather trying. "But you're quite right, sir, about the guard."

"You ought to get on to those four young women again. Bully them a bit. Get them to tell you which compartment the girl sat in, and ask them how they can be certain, and remind them they'll have to testify in court—if we get a conviction (which we shan't, Jervis, ten to one we shan't) and you're able to arrest this young woman. I can't quite see—however, no doubt it's all in your report—exactly why you're so certain she did it. I'd say there was a man in the case, myself."

"Yes, sir, a husband. He might have done it from jealousy. I've got that far. The child she was going to have was not his child. But the trouble is—I've embodied this in my report, sir, the one which I sent in this morning—the chap was in quod when she was murdered."

"What a splendid alibi!" said the chief constable with enthusiasm. "You know, apart from his having been dead, I don't know when I've heard of a better! It would take those detective writer fellows—Freeman Wills Crofts and the others—some time to think of a way round that; don't you agree?"

The inspector, who was in the mood when men lift up their eyes imploring the aid of heaven to give them patience, acquiesced, and then said hastily, before his superior had a chance to develop his theme:

"I've checked up, sir, and it's right. He was jugged for being drunk and disorderly and for obstructing the police. He got a fortnight without

the option at Marlborough Street, and his detention covered the period during which the murder took place."

"Interesting case, you know, Jervis," said the chief constable, getting up, walking out at the open french window and snipping off three dead roses before he continued his remarks. He stared intently down at the bit of mould which had clung to the heel of his shoe and was now on a little rug which covered about a foot and a half of the polished boards just inside the aperture made by the open windows, kicked it slightly, and then said :

"Sherlock Holmes would have made a lot out of that. What were we saying? Oh, yes. So the husband couldn't have done it. No. I see that. I see that. Now what could have possessed this young woman you've got your eye on? Good profession, short hours, long holidays, sufficient pay, decent working conditions—why does a girl like that commit murder? Deep waters, Jervis, you know. Very deep waters, I should say. And I ain't sure, somehow, you're not trying to drown yourself in 'em," he added, with one of those rare flashes of intelligence which, in admittedly foolish and witless superior officers, are so greatly and reasonably dreaded by inferiors.

"But, actually, sir, there's no one else who *could* have done it," argued the inspector desperately. "If you'd been as closely in touch with the case as I have, I think you'd say so yourself."

"But, my dear fellow, why? I'm only asking you *why* she should do it. I'm not really saying she didn't. But look what she'd got to lose!"

"A profession she detested and wasn't very much good at; pay she could have doubled and trebled and quadrupled in a year if once she dared take the plunge, give up her job and take to writing for a living, sir," replied the inspector, removing all the melodrama from the words by the tone in which he uttered them.

"Dubious reasoning, my dear fellow. Very dubious, don't you think? It wouldn't be my advice," interpolated the chief constable. "Suppose it didn't come off? End up in the gutter like that, you know, if you've got to live on what you earn."

"Yes, sir, that's just my point. I think I know why she did the murder, sir. Publicity."

"Eh, Jervis?"

"Publicity, sir. In her spare time this Miss French writes detective stories under the name of Fenby. I reckon she saw how to get to the Big Time stuff without spending years in building up a steady reputation."

"Writes detective stories, docs she?" said the chief constable. "I must see whether I can get hold of one or two."

"Yes, sir. A secondary motive, as I see it from the evidence at my disposal, is jealousy of a sexual nature."

"Not enough of a motive for murder, would you say?" enquired the chief constable judiciously. "Hardly get away with that in England. Unless you're looking for a Broadmoor case," he added.

"I see it as a secondary motive, sir," the inspector

repeated stolidly. "I still think the publicity stunt for her books was the real motive."

"Well, well, you go and see the guard," said the chief constable, suddenly bored. "I suppose you know who he is, and all that, what?"

"Yes, sir. Enoch Filby. He happens to live in New Abbots. I'll get along and see him this afternoon, sir." He picked up his cap.

The chief constable rose and clapped him on the shoulder.

"You're a good fellow, Jervis," he said. "You've worked damned hard and very sensibly over all this. Now you take my advice, and don't go and stub your toe. The minute this case looks as if it's going to break, you call in Scotland Yard. No brain for detection myself, not the slightest bit, so can't give you hints and tips. But there's something funny somewhere, my dear fellow; something very funny. Can't put my finger on it, but it ain't such plain sailing as you think. I'm going to ride over the hill this afternoon, and talk it over with Lumley. But you mark my words, and mind where you put your feet. There's something more in all this than you've put your finger on yet. You bring in The Yard, and let them make fools of themselves. After all, it's the London end it's going to break from, actually. That seems fairly certain."

This depressing and inevitable conclusion had been haunting the inspector himself. It was all too evident, he told himself, that the case was a London job, but the last thing he wanted to do was to hand it over. He walked down the drive to where he had left his small car, for he was a very

modest, unassuming fellow and would not have dreamed of leaving his car just under the chief constable's windows.

The frown between his eyes had not entirely disappeared even by the time he reached New Abbots.

The guard was off duty, for the inspector had arranged his visit to ensure this coincidence. His home was one of a row of semi-detached houses which had been put up by a speculative builder whose brother was on the local council. The council had loaned the money at six per cent to the inhabitants who proposed to buy the houses, and the guard expected to repay the whole of the five hundred and fifty he had borrowed in three years and seven weeks from the date of the inspector's visit. He was sitting at the back of the house, under the glass roof of a small verandah-like porch, when the inspector called. He said he liked to sit there and look at the trains, which could be seen on a long curve of the line before they entered the tunnel, and to reflect upon how pleasant it was to be off duty instead of on one of the trains ; but really he only cared to look at the hill as it loomed like a threat over the rest of the landscape, and to reflect how much like God it was, a menace to man's peace and a perpetual challenge to his conscience. The religion of the valley was not the religion of the guard, who had been very strictly brought up, and who believed the Church of England to be decadent and to offer to its followers merely the primrose path of an easy life, an easy burial and an easy descent to destruction.

His wife admitted the inspector and took him into a dust-scented, very formal parlour before she went to fetch her husband.

"It's the police, Enoch," she said. "Have there been an accident on the line?"

The guard himself supposed that this must be the case, and was surprised, and, for some curious reason, flattered, when he learned the inspector's business. Jervis came promptly to the point.

"You remember coming down on the twelve o'clock from the London terminus the day before that woman was murdered up there in Low Abbots?"

"No, not particular," replied the guard.

"Passengers included a carriage full of children—little girls—coming for this country holiday. One of 'em pulled the communication cord and stopped the train."

"Surprising how often that happens," said the guard. "I could tell you of dozens of experiences."

"Yes, I'm sure. But this one concerns the murder. I've reason to think . . ." he eyed the long, thin, serious, not very intelligent man in front of him " . . . that someone may have boarded the train while it was still, and your evidence may be important."

The guard's thin mouth under the long, unkempt, uneven, drooping moustache, gave a slight, sardonic twist. He answered, rasping the words :

"Nobody got on the train."

"Are you certain?"

"I am. As certain as I am of anything. What do you think I'm there for?"

"I know all that," said the inspector patiently. "I suppose you went all down the train to

check up who had pulled the communication cord ? ”

“ As a matter of routine, yes. As a matter of common sense, no.”

“ Meaning ? ” The inspector looked hopeful, and poised a well-sharpened pencil above his open note-book.

“ I didn’t think of they children,” admitted the guard. “ I was on to a couple of elderly women, the silly clucking sort, one in a carriage with seven men, all smoking, it was a smoking compartment, writ plain, and she had already tried to call in young Ted Berry, as does the shouting for lunches, but Ted jerks his thumb at the *Smoking* notice and gives a wink to the men, so he says, and another old woman in with two girls drinking cocktails. Brought their own on to the train, ready mixed. I’d give them what for if they was my daughters, I know, and the old lady called me in and asked me to speak to them, which, as a man and a brother, I was quite willing to do, but as an employee, not my job, and while observing Mammon and Satan and Beelzebub, hand in hand, it is no place of mine to tell the daughters of Lot, Sodom or Gomorrah where they will go to or what they will be changed to, or whose right hand or left hand they will go on . . . ”

“ Yes, O.K.,” said the inspector, hastily. “ So you started with those two old ladies, found them both all right, and then inspected the rest of the train. Is that it ? ”

The glazed look which had come over the fanatical face of the guard melted into his ordinary but still impressive expression as he replied :

"I did, in a manner of speaking, inspect the train, but my real bee-line was next for them kids, although I looked in all the carriages from routine, that being what I'm paid for. Girl children," he added, suddenly raising his voice to its maniacal chant, "is only fit for . . ."

"Yes," said the inspector. "And after you'd found which one did it, you did not finish the train, but gave the All Clear and the train went on. Now what I want to know . . ."

"What you want to know you'll learn in good time," said the guard. "You listen to me, and don't get me all muddled up. I know what you're after, and you won't get it none the quicker for muddling of me up."

The inspector was inclined to agree, and remained silent while the guard recollected his thoughts, arranged them and selected those proper to the argument.

"I lights on the sinner—culprit—who pulls the chain," he said, "a little girl of about eleven years, and she has scraped the seat where she stood on it, as I point out before taking her name and address."

"Yes. And then you went on and inspected the rest of the train?"

The inspector did not wish to sound too anxious. The point was all-important. It did not matter whether this particular witness realised its importance, but so much hung on it that it must be answered clearly, unequivocally and satisfactorily. The guard, after giving him a hard stare which made the inspector wonder for a moment whether he had

under-rated the intelligence of the witness, replied conclusively :

" In case of anything funny, I investigated all the rest of the train.

" Ah ? " said the inspector, with a negligence he did not feel.

" Yes. I thought it as well. You never know, you know. Accomplices," said the guard, as though he had given away a secret. The inspector nodded.

" We know all about those in *our* job," he admitted.

" But the kid stood alone, I suppose ? "

" You've said it. I went up and down, up and down," said the guard imaginatively, " but nothing else seemed wrong."

" Ah ! " said the inspector. " You went right to the end of the train ? "

" End to end," said the guard. There was a silence. Then the inspector said :

" Everybody in their seats ? "

" You know what kids are," said the guard, austere. The inspector, remembering his own youth, felt his heart sink.

" All in the corridor, I suppose ? "

" All in the corridor," agreed the guard.

" The helpers ? "

" Oh, *them* ! "

" All in their seats ? "

" I dunno. Some was in the corridor, trying to get the kids to pipe down, or opening the windows."

" Is it true all the doors opposite the corridor side were locked ? "

" For why should they be *unlocked* ? Holiday services. People always irresponsible and flighty."

"Yes. How many helpers, would you say?"

"Five."

"Five?"

"I thought of the three Evangelists and then of Martha and Mary."

"Oh? One of them have red hair?"

"I don't take any stock in women's hair."

"But you'd swear to five?"

"Five they was. Three evangelists and the other two, as I said."

"Ah?" He departed thoughtful, went back to his wife, put his hand on her shoulder and said:

"Minnie, I made a hash of this case, I reckon."

He recounted the conversation with the guard.

"These Nonconformists!" said his wife. "What's he mean—three evangelists?"

"Well, Matthew, Mark, Luke and—— Gosh!" said the inspector.

"Luke and John. Making, as I make it, four."

"Well, but—that makes it worse, my dear, not better. I don't want *six* people. Four is what I'm looking for. Five, if I have to. But I swear that red-head wasn't on the train. Who could the other two have been?"

"Women, anyway," said his wife. "And if they were women, you can find them out any time you want to. Now you come up to the table. I've got your favourite . . ."

The inspector drew up his chair. Seated at the table he smacked it with his flat and open palm.

"He'll have to identify 'em! That's what he'll have to do!" he said.

"Doubtful whether he'll be able to. Guards see a lot of people, when you come to think of it," said his wife. "What's he say about the train being stopped?"

"Said it was pretty ordinary, which I don't believe. I've travelled by train a good bit, and never yet known the communication cord to be pulled," said the inspector. He sniffed the air. "Steak and kidney! Atta-boy!" he added.

Having finished the steak and kidney pie and mashed potatoes, drunk up the remainder of the beer, wiped his mouth on his table-napkin (under his wife's influential and all-seeing eye), he rose, and, banging down the table-napkin under a large, determined palm, observed conclusively:

"He's got to come across. What's more, my girl, you'll have to be one of the objay darts, and you can fetch Mrs. Smart in for another."

He explained. His wife went to interview the neighbour, a sportive lady with a small independent income, two grown-up children and a barrel of beer which (for none ever saw it changed) appeared to combine in equal parts the properties of Elijah's widow's cruse of oil and the kind of magic understood by Thomas Ingoldsby. In a short time the two women reappeared.

"Got to be directly," said the inspector, "because he's off duty and I don't know when I can come by him again. You ladies get yourselves to Low Abbots, to the *Rose and Thorn*, and tell Joe I've got to have the commerical to myself for half an hour."

By sending out scouts and messengers and by picking up stragglers in his car, he himself contrived

to assemble the helpers at the *Rose and Thorn* some hour and three-quarters after his wife and Mrs. Smart had commandeered the commuerical.

This room was familiar to everybody present, and particularly so to the four helpers because it happened to be the one in which they had had their supper and their breakfast when they had arrived in Low Abbots.

"I want you ladies," said the inspector, "to sit about as you will."

"You mean where we sat on the evening before the murder, inspector?" said Miss Smithers.

"No, ladies. Don't, please, think about the murder at all. I just want you to sit about wherever you please. Two ladies who like the warmth could sit on either side of the fire" (there was a medium-sized and very cheerful, brightly burning fire, as usual, in the grate), "and any lady that felt like taking her ease could perhaps lie on the settee with her feet up, and another couple of ladies could look out of the window, say, and another sit herself on that little poofee that I see there. . . ."

He had them all arranged and in waxwork order by the time he had summoned the guard. The guard, suspicious, irritated at having been invcigled, upon any pretext, into a public-house, and disgruntled at having to spend his few hours off duty at the bidding of the police, stepped into the room, looked round it, said flatly :

"I don't recognise a single one of 'em, and that's that," and would have torn himself away except that the sergeant, who had accompanied the inspector to "quell riots and see fair play," as he himself

expressed it, grasped him firmly by the collar, said : "None of that, my lad," and yanked him back into the room.

"Now, then, sir," he said to the inspector.

"That won't do, you know," the inspector said kindly, picking up his cue. "None of that, now. Just you look round careful, and tell me if you've ever seen any of these ladies before in your life."

The guard looked round the room. From the settee Miss French grinned. From the easy chairs by the fire-place Miss Smithers and Mrs. Jervis smiled encouragingly. In the window Miss Plimmon and Miss Mortimer turned their heads to look him straight in the face. From the leather-covered hassock which the inspector had kicked out from behind the end of the settee, the widow, Mrs. Smart, looked intelligently malicious, drew her fashionable skirt down, and smoothed her neat brown hair.

"None of 'em," said the guard. "Except the red-headed one, that is. Anyone would remember 'air like that."

"But, look here, man," said the inspector. The guard held up his hand.

"No good," he said. "I wouldn't know the rest of them from Adam."

"Eve," said Miss French, quietly and politely. Her the guard silenced with a Nonconformist scowl of an unambiguous kind, and she subsided. "I don't spend my life regarding Women," he concluded. "Think myself shame if I did."

"So you don't even recognise that these were the ladies on the train when that child pulled the

communication cord?" said the inspector. The guard replied without hesitation:

"I couldn't recognise one, except the one I said. Once a man's married, *all* young women should look alike to him, and *that's* my last word on a subject I don't approve of. Unless they pull the communication cord or smoke in a non-smoking to somebody else's objection"—at this point he stared at Miss French who had lighted a cigarette—"or make themselves any sort of noosance, which far too many do, I take no notice, and otherwise I don't see you can expect."

"But you recognise the red-haired lady?" persisted the inspector when he and the guard were out in the hall.

"Ah, but I don't say I seen her on the train," said the guard, with a flicker of geniality which the inspector translated as a mental dig in the ribs.

XI

The Story Told by the Chief Constable



"IT'S LIKE THIS, LADIES," SAID THE INSPECTOR, WHEN the guard, Mrs. Smart and his own wife had been sent back to their homes in New Abbots, and he had the four helpers beneath his eye in the commercial room. "I've got so far. Now I'm not going to try and deceive you. There's been a murder done, and so far no arrest has been made because there didn't seem very much to go on. I'll tell you quite frankly what I've got, and I'm hoping it will suggest to one or more of you ladies to come across with anything else you know."

"Dilly, Dilly, come and be killed, in other words," remarked Miss French, in her languid tones. "You'll have to get a move on, anyway, inspector, if you're going to arrest one of us, because we've only got the fortnight, all told."

"I can't help that, miss, I'm afraid," responded Jervis with the ponderous matter-of-factness which was his greatest weapon and which he seemed to know how and when to use. He saw his hearers glance at one another. Then Miss Smithers said :

"I'm a bit too hot by this fire. Does it matter if I change my place, inspector?"

"By no means, miss, so long as you don't stand any nearer the door," replied the inspector. Miss French grinned, and even Miss Plimmon looked nervously amused. Miss Smithers sat down on the hassock vacated by Mrs. Smart.

"Who were the other two women, inspector?" she asked.

"My wife and a friend of hers, miss," the inspector replied.

"Put in with us to check up on the guard?" enquired Miss French. Her grin widened. "You fell down on the guard, inspector."

"The guard is an honest man, miss," said the inspector, unperturbed. "The world is crammed with people, especially ladies, who'd swear to anything and anybody just to console their vanity or create some sort of trouble. He wouldn't even hardly swear to *you*, miss, not when I got him outside," he added, with just a touch of malice in his otherwise matter-of-fact tone. Miss French did not take up the point. She yawned, gave a stretch like a satisfied cat and then put her hand to her mouth to stifle a second yawn.

"Strong-looking fingers you've got, miss," said the inspector. He stretched out his own brown paw. The grip he got in response crushed his signet ring into his finger and made him wince.

"I believe you," said Miss French, with indolent ease. "And if you mean to arrest me, come on. I feel we should get the tidings to our dear head when we can, then she can think about dragooning the

Committee for someone to carry on my work. It'll only be anticipating things by a month or two that's all."

"Ah, yes. Your novels, miss," said the inspector. He did not know whether the green eyes, which flicked their gaze towards him and then withdrew it, held fear, a challenge or amusement.

"Yes, inspector, my novels. Doing not so badly, thank you very much, and liable to do much better once I can give sufficient time to them. Yes, I was leaving at Christmas ; so, bring out the handcuffs and I'll promise to go quite quietly."

"Nonsense, Miss French ! Please remember where you are !" said Miss Mortimer, turning from the window, out of which she had gazed in displeasure at the beginning and up to the middle of the conversation.

"Oh, you represent the Committee, don't you, Miss Mortimer ?" said Miss French, without troubling to look towards the window. "Well, perhaps you'll tell them why it is impossible for me to give the usual month's notice. I shall be glad of my salary all the same. I should hardly think they'll have the cheek to withhold it, although you never know. *Force majeure* is a good plea in law, inspector, isn't it ?"

"But I'm not arresting you, miss," said the inspector, woodenly. "Whatever put that notion into you head."

"I'll tell you," said Miss French, "although I seem to have said it before. You've got a case against me, inspector. Oh, I know you can't prove it, but it's there. After all, I *did* sleep in the same

room, and I *ought* to have heard something of what was happening, and your view is that I jolly well would have heard something if the something hadn't been done by me, myself."

She held up her strong hands, white with the creamy whiteness of all red-haired people of her particular colouring, and laughed, but not amusedly.

"It's not only that, miss," said the inspector quietly. "I have ample proof that you never came down here by train, but that you rode here on your motor-cycle on the previous Saturday or Sunday, and only joined the train for its last stage up the valley. What do you say to that?"

The other three women looked at Miss French and then again at the inspector. The red-haired girl was still smiling, but two little muscles at the side of her face had tightened into two little balls, very noticeable and not very pretty. The inspector was, as usual, solemn and heavy, and it was Miss Smithers who, breaking the sudden and dramatic silence, supplied the adjective of which none of them, for all their intensive study of the stories in the monthly magazines, fully understood the implication.

"Poker-faced!" she cried. "He's poker-faced. Don't trust him an inch, French! Be on your guard! He's clever!"

The inspector himself smiled at that.

"No, miss," he responded. "I can't take that. I'm afraid I'm not clever. But I *am* hardworking, and I *have* found out what I say."

"But—I beg your pardon, inspector!" said the mild and flustered Miss Plimmon. As though he sensed the danger, the inspector turned to face her

as he would have faced a wild boar that he knew was in the undergrowth but which he could not see. Yet her silly, mild face was alight with the will to help. So she looked, the inspector surmised, at women's sewing meetings and at the distribution of parcels to needy, sycophantic parishioners.

"I'm *sure* you're wrong there, inspector," she proceeded. "Miss French was on the train from first to last. She got in with me, and as a matter of fact, although I don't wish any notice to be taken, because, of course, I was only too pleased, I shared my sandwiches with her. She didn't care for them much, because they were cheese, although she was too polite to say so. You *didn't* care for them much, dear, did you?" she concluded.

"Well, no," Miss French agreed. Her green eyes rested, ruminating, on Miss Plimmon. "Fancy you noticing that," she added, transferring her gaze from Miss Plimmon's face (where it seemed to disconcert) to her small plump hands which were folded old-maidish in her lap.

"We who live alone," said Miss Plimmon, addressing herself this time to the inspector, "contrary to all general belief, *do* notice things. It's really extraordinary."

"Even things that aren't there," said Miss Smithers, under her breath.

Miss French and Miss Plimmon heard the remark, however. The former chuckled, and the latter looked evilly—the inspector was mildly surprised to note how evilly—upon the girl. He added to his already unfavourable portrait of Miss Plimmon another tell-tale touch.

"Thing is, you know, Plimmie," said Miss French, "you're telling lies, and the inspector, I've no doubt, knows it. You don't know whether I was on the train or not, and, as a matter of actual fact, I wasn't. And as for sandwiches, I never eat the things!"

"Why should you give me a statement that isn't the truth, miss?" asked the inspector, interested. Miss Plimmon's hunted hare's eyes looked first, it seemed, over one shoulder and then over the other, but there was no escaping the question. She doubled speedily.

"I am mistaken, then, inspector. Of course, if Miss French was not on the train, she was not. I merely thought I distinctly remembered seeing her, that was all. I suppose I had a dream about the sandwiches."

Miss Mortimer, who had sat dignified, impassive and silent during these skirmishes which, her reason told her, were but the preliminaries to the battle royal which was about to take place, now unsheathed the sword in preparation for combat.

"I don't see why you thought Miss French was on the train if she was not, Miss Plimmon," she observed. "But, if you'll excuse my passing the remark, inspector, I ought to tell you that I am perfectly certain I saw her get on to the bus."

"It's all right. I got on the train, too," said Miss French. "I was only pulling Plimmie's leg just now. Of course I was on the bus and the train. Where do you think you get off, inspector, with this stuff about me and a motor-bike? I can drive a car a bit, although my nerve always fails me when

it comes to a driving test, but a bike? Lord love a duck!" she concluded vulgarly.

"So that's your story, miss, is it?" said the inspector. "So be it, then. I arrest you for the—hi, where are you, sergeant?—there you are!—now, Miss French, I arrest you for the wilful murder of Alice Alexandra Marion Beekie Francis, married name Waterbury, and it is my duty to warn you that anything you say may be taken down in writing and used in evidence."

"You poor fish!" said his prisoner scornfully; a remark which the sergeant copied faithfully into his note-book.

There was a very painful silence, big with shock and dismay. It was broken by Miss Smithers, who, with tears on her lashes and in a broken, husky voice, said:

"Cheer up, French. We'll soon have you back with us again. Is there—do you want to take anything with you, or shall I bring it?"

"You see, sir," said the inspector very unhappily, "that yarn that she was in the train and not in the train, and all that, just about finished things off, and I think you'll agree that there's plenty to go on, adding it all together."

"Not a thing, not a thing, my dear fellow, so far as I can see," said the chief constable heartily, eyeing what he had thought for the last ten minutes to be a snail on one of his plants. "Excuse me just one minute."

He leapt nimbly through the french window,

jumped over an ornamental pond, and proved to his own satisfaction that he was right. He then picked up the snail and cantered down the drive. The inspector, furious, but not on the snail's behalf, waited in sullen politeness whilst his returned superior wiped his fingers on an antimacassar, replaced it tenderly over the back of a chair, smacked his hands together and said :

"Well, well ! That's that ! Finest long sight in the county, although I say it myself. And now, my dear fellow, what were we saying about this murder of yours ? Oh, yes, I know. No good. What is it they find ? A True Bill ? Never, my dear chap, never. Now, look here, what have you got ? No certainty. Not one atom of proof. And there's that poor, respectable, young woman in the jug. Get us into a lot of hot water, you know, the deuce of a lot of hot water, besides being a laughing stock ; not that I mind that, of course. I take all responsibility for your action, although I don't like it. No, I don't like it at all."

"What should I have done then, sir ? " enquired the inspector, resentment making his voice quite toneless, as it usually did.

"Eh ? Oh, arrested her, of course. Arrested her. Only thing possible in the circumstances. Oh, quite. Well, damn it, if I can't see another of those beastly snails ! Excuse me just one moment ! "

And he darted out again. The inspector, left by himself, muttered rudely under his breath, and reviewed his action in the light of what his superior had elected to say about it.

"And now, my dear chap," said the chief con-

stable, returning by way of the hall door this time. He was followed by a manservant bearing a decanter, a siphon, glasses, a box of cigars, the silver box of cigarettes, some sandwiches and some savoury biscuits. "Sit down and tell me all about it. I've read your reports very carefully. I'm sure you've done some good work ; and if, by this arrest, you've landed us in the ditch, well, we must find a way to scramble out, that's all."

The inspector looked stolidly down on to the top of the chief constable's egg-shaped head.

"Don't loom, my dear fellow," said his host. "Sit down, sit down. Beer if you don't like whisky. Canopy, telephone the inspector's wife to go to bed without him. Fellow's name's Canopy," he added, as his servant departed, having silently placed a large silver cigarette-lighter and a small cigar-cutter on the table. "Silly damn name, but what can you do about it? Nothing. Now, then, no nonsense about when . . ."

"So it seemed to me, sir," said the inspector, "that some of the evidence was just a little bit queer. Take, for instance . . ." He turned the pages of his first report . . . "that business of the two of 'em sharing that bedroom the murdered woman was in. Now you don't tell me that that fell out accidental."

"According to your report, it seems to me that it did," remarked the chief constable. "Both the women had had a good deal to drink, and it was plain from the evidence that neither of them was

going to share with Miss Plimmon, so they pushed the youngster, Miss Smithers, on to her, and took the other bedroom themselves."

"It *could* have fallen out like you say, sir," said the inspector, "but, personally, I don't see it like that. I think French worked it."

"You'd find that difficult to prove, in the face of the evidence which you yourself have collected," demurred the chief constable. He stared so fixedly out of the window that the inspector was afraid that his long sight was going to function again in favour of descrying snails. But after a minute he said: "Did it not strike you as odd, that song and dance the girl made in court about its having rained on the night of the murder?"

"The—Miss French, sir? Yes, but there wasn't any rain on the night of the murder. It was a particularly fine night, if you remember."

"I do remember. And that is why I draw your attention to the remark. Why should she have supposed she heard rain if there wasn't any?"

"I couldn't say, sir. I didn't give the remark my particular attention."

"And yet, you know, as remarks go, it was an interesting one, my dear fellow. You remember Sherlock Holmes' dog in the night?"

"I didn't know that Sherlock Holmes kept a dog, sir."

"He didn't. This was the dog in the *Silver Blaze* story. You don't recollect it?"

"No, sir."

"Well, the dog didn't bark in the night when it ought to have barked."

"Yes, sir?"

"And the girl heard rain in the night when it didn't rain. Suggest nothing to you, my dear fellow?"

The inspector, his thick fingers on his whisky glass, shook his head; but his intelligent little eyes looked up and caught those of his superior. He drank some whisky, frowning. Then his face cleared.

"It might be a point, sir," he said. The chief constable watched him a moment. Then he responded:

"Awkward thing to arrest the wrong person, you know."

"Worse to let the right one slip through your fingers," muttered the inspector.

"Yes. There's that as well. The one thing is really complementary to the other, my dear fellow. Well, that's that. I should certainly look into it. It may interest you. For, of course, once the girl gets her story to her lawyer, your ideas won't hold water for a second."

"You mean they'll fix us with motive?" said the inspector doubtfully. "But the motive's not really so weak, sir."

"I can show you two better ones, much better ones, my dear fellow."

"Yes, sir, I know. The husband, who couldn't, and the other fellow, whoever he is, that could."

"And did. Exactly. By the way, you haven't got on to this young Walter yet, have you?"

"No, sir. I don't think he could tell us much. I understand he's ten years younger—a good bit

younger, anyhow—than the murdered woman. Not very likely *he'd* be mixed up in anything."

"You never know, though. Henry Jacoby, Thompson and Bywaters—there are funny fry sometimes among the young ones, Jervis."

"True enough, sir. I'll make a point of him, then. But there's a lot of evidence in favour of my ideas, sir. Firstly, there's that business of how clever she was in getting someone else to find the body. All that business with pulling down the window curtains seems to me all my eye. There wasn't the slightest reason why they should all come down."

"Now that gets us back to the rain that didn't fall, it seems to me," observed the chief constable. "Suppose you ought to have been in a certain place—in bed, we'll say, in spinsterish virtue—and you happen to have been—to put it politely—somewhere else? Now if you were in with a bevy of silly old gossiping hens like this Miss Plimmon and this Miss Mortimer, wouldn't you rather want to draw their attention to the idea that you were very much where you were supposed to be—even if you had to be large as life and twice as natural to do it?"

"You mean she did climb up and pull the curtains down deliberate, sir, but not for the reason I thought? You mean she just intended to bring the others into the room. . . ."

"To see her bed picturesquely tumbled and the whole pageant of innocent beddery—as the Elizabethans, somehow, would *not* have said—on view for the most censorious to see?—dash it, yes, I do."

"But, all the same, sir, the publicity motive——"

"Won't wash. Not with a girl in a respectable,

gosh-awful profession like that of elementary-school teacher. She wouldn't have the guts to go in for publicity of that sort. To be decently anonymous is all those women are after."

"But, sir, that can't be right! She published books."

"Detective stories. Just a little hobby. No one would think much of that. It's not like writing a revue."

"No, sir, but, all the same, as I see it, she was pretty desperate. And they must have had rows in their time."

"The usual pin-pricking and face-slapping, with a sly kick in the rear occasionally, yes. But what's that, among women? Only the usual give and take, my dear fellow. You happily married men don't know what women can be when you herd 'em together and keep 'em away from the men. Bless you, I used to be trustee in a Home for Naughty Girls, once. . . ."

"Pardon me, sir, but that's my very point!" said the inspector, determined to speak. "That's what I say. The funny things that blew up could quite easily end in murder. And when women like that start scrapping over a man . . ."

"All right. We'll leave it at that," said the chief constable, lifting the decanter. "By the way, I suppose it struck you," he added, "that Miss French, at the inquest, was very anxious to see that no harm befell young Mr. Walter?"

"Yes. I noticed that, sir. I remarked upon it to the sergeant, and, later on, to my wife. And speaking of my wife reminds me, sir, of the other

particular point I mentioned to her after the inquest. That business of the bedroom door being open seemed to me suspicious. But I suppose your idea about the rain would clear up that as well."

"I think it would, you know, Jervis. It would also turn round the right way Miss French's remark that it was Miss Francis who went out on the excuse of retrieving the toothbrush. That would have been Miss French herself who did that."

"And came quietly back in the morning without having to make any fuss, and genuinely didn't know that a murder had been committed in her absence?" said the inspector doubtfully. "Would you mind if I used your telephone, sir, for a minute?"

"Go ahead, go ahead, my dear fellow."

The inspector's call was to the *Rose and Thorn*.

"Joc's gone to Abbot's Rearing," said the voice at the other end. "Can I take a message?"

"No. You'll do, Emmy," responded the inspector. "Can you tell me which tap at the *Rose and Thorn* wants a new washer fitted?"

There was an uncomprehending but pleasant feminine laugh at the other end.

"That dratted room! You can tell your friends, whoever they are, the washer was fitted last Tuesday. I never noticed it myself, but the gentleman had the room last, he went on about it something chronic. Kept him awake all night, he said, just like rain-water running; stuffed his flannel up the spout of the tap and everything. Fancy! He did carry on."

"Single man? One of the commercials?" enquired the inspector, much interested.

"There's no such thing as a single commercial,"

said the voice, with a salacious chuckle. "Wives in every port, like the sailors, that lot have. But he took the room as a single, if that's what you mean."

"It is. Now, look here, Emmy, you'll excuse the question, but is there any reason to think he *shared* the room with anybody that night that young woman was murdered?"

"Oh, Henry, don't remind me of that!"

"No, seriously, Emmy. I've got the chief constable this end, so none of your nonsense."

"Nonsense! I like your idea! I don't believe I've had a good night since it happened. But since you ask, no, we've no particular reason—besides, old Mr. Odds would have heard him."

"Who's Odds?"

"Why, the gentleman with the cough. My permanent."

"Does he hear things?"

"Yes, of course he does. Not malicious, you know, but only interested. If anybody walks about at night, even if it's for the best of reasons, he always asks us all about it next day."

"Did he complain about the tap?"

"God bless you, no. He never complains about anything. He asked about it once, when first it started. After that he said it seemed like company. He misses it now it's got the new washer on, or so he told me this morning."

"What's the name of the cove who complained?"

"Cave. Travels for Hearth, Home and County."

"Thanks very much, Emmy. Tell Joe I rang up. Good-bye." He hung up and turned to face the chief constable.

"Thanks very much indeed, sir, for the tip. There's certainly a line to follow up about the rain. But I'm not at all sure it lets Miss French out—not by a long chalk I'm not."

"Of course it doesn't—yet. But what's on your mind particularly?"

"Well, sir, it's just the way it still adds up to me. Take it bit by bit, as we were doing. There's the fact that Miss French told me, when I asked her, that she and Miss Francis hardly knew each other outside of their job. Well, it seems they did, and that looks fishy to me."

"Oh, I don't know. If you were a woman of that type, you wouldn't want people mixing you up with a murder if you could avoid it."

"She couldn't avoid it, sir. She was too far involved already, up to that point, to want to start sticking it out."

"No. I agree about that. Now, then, about her description of the beginning of the day. . . . You're worried about the motor-cyclist who seems to have been Miss French made up as a man. But, you know, Jervis, it wouldn't necessarily be for a criminal reason that she did such a thing—if she did it."

"I don't think there's any doubt she did it, sir. What's more, the others suspected her of the murder, same as I did. You can tell that from their evidence. One of 'em, in particular, that Miss Plimmon"—his powerful thumb raked over the pages in his notebook—"she went out of her way to impress upon me the fact that she always went to sleep in a train. Cover, I thought it, for anything awkward she might

be asked later on. It would let her out nicely, for instance, if she were asked to take her oath whether Miss French was on the train or not—or got on or off, or anything. My oath, sir!" he added, breaking into a new idea with the luminous face of a young boy letting off fireworks. "That's an idea, that is! They all swore nobody joined the train, but that's where they may have foxed me. She was on the train, we'll say, at the beginning of the journey——"

"Impossible, my dear fellow, if she was really riding a motor-cycle up the hill at nine o'clock that morning. At eight o'clock, in fact."

"Hum! Come back all I said," observed the inspector, in a mutter. "Anyway, washing that out, sir, there's the evidence given by Miss Smithers that she'd been sick. She kept on telling me that. Laid a good deal of stress on it. Now, why, unless she was going to sort of alibi herself out of something, like the other old girl with her sleep?"

"All these women can't have been in collusion, Jervis, you know," said the chief constable. "But still," he added hastily, feeling the inspector's eye on him, "you're quite right, of course, to take everything into consideration. I must say I think you've worked extremely hard. Extremely hard, my dear fellow, and most intelligently."

The inspector, who liked his superior when he did not leap fish-ponds and chase snails, but who heartily resented patronage, grunted and continued, still thumbing his note-book:

"Then we've got this Miss Mortimer, who wanted to stand me out that it was suicide."

The chief constable declined to discuss Miss Mortimer. He said :

"I don't believe for one instant that Miss French was the person on that motor-bike. That little rat of a poacher would like to make any mischief he could with the police. He saw what he said he saw, that is, the motor-cycle combination which went up to the quarry, and the solo motor-cycle which came down, but he obviously can't prove anything about those number plates. I think he saw the murderer, but I don't believe the murderer was Miss French. That's flat for you. If she had been, Joe Herberd at the *Rose and Thorn* would have recognised her again. He's a very observant fellow. Don't you remember how he put us on to those hayrick rascals last year ? "

"Yes, sir, but the motor-cyclist never went inside the *Rose and Thorn*."

"Who says not ? I think you'll find he did. No, I'm not arguing the point ; I've put myself in this murderer's place, and I've worked out what I should have done, and what I think he did. Now you get on with your tale, and don't bother with my ill-informed theories."

"I don't think they're ill-informed, sir."

"Well, no. I've had all your reports. Models of lucidity, my dear fellow. I've brought them to special notice. You may be sure of that. And, of course, I'm going to associate myself with any action you take."

"Even wrongful arrest ? " said the inspector, a little sourly. The chief constable pushed the decanter towards him. "But, look here, sir, there

is something fishy about Miss French. Her story of the evening drinking and its effects don't tally at all with what I've had from others."

"Yes, it does," said the Chief Constable. "You mean the bit about Miss Smithers being sick? Well, that sort of thing is regarded askance by women. I don't suppose, in any case, that Miss Mortimer and Miss Plimmon knew very much about it. I imagine it was Miss Francis and Miss French who escorted the young woman to the bathroom and hauled her along to her room. That would still have given Miss French enough time to go back downstairs for her saloon bar drinks, you know."

"At half-past eleven at night? Not if I know Joe Herberd," said the inspector.

"She couldn't be served in the ordinary way, of course," agreed the chief constable, "but surely there's nothing to prevent a gentleman offering drinks to his guests in his own house at any hour in the twenty-four, my dear Jervis?"

The inspector, who had already put this view of the case before Miss Plimmon, accepted it, and filled his pipe. Before he could resume the tale of events which, in his opinion, justified the arrest of Miss French, the chief constable suddenly cut in.

"About that girl reporting she'd had a bilious attack in the morning. I think you're wrong about that. Don't you see that it was only a bit of camouflage for the bilious attack at night? She supposed you'd get to hear about it (which you did, from Miss French) and so she did her best to forestall criticism by inventing or exaggerating a bilious attack in the morning."

"Yes, sir, that might be it," assented the inspector. "As a matter of fact, she's pretty smart, that young lady. She tumbled straight away to the funny business about the open door."

"And about the fact that Miss Francis might be a married woman," said the chief constable. He nodded, looked out of the window, thought better of the snails and the dead roses, and looked across the table again at the inspector.

"And now," he said easily, leaning back a little in his chair, "what are those dark suspicions you entertain about Miss Plimmon?"

The inspector's mouth fell open. He had not expected this broadside of a question.

"Well, sir," he began, a little helplessly, "of course, it's not easy to say. Ladies of Miss Plimmon's age are often a bit peculiar, but I did rather find myself wondering——"

"Whether she wasn't (a) mad, (b) bad," said the chief constable. "As a matter of fact, I think she's a little of both. With what particular badness did you associate her?"

"I wondered whether she mightn't be a bit of a blackmailer, sir."

"The most likely thing in the world, I should imagine. And, by Jove!" said the chief constable, "if we get in a mess with this wrongful arrest of Miss French—no, no, I don't mean that, my dear fellow!" he interpolated hastily. "I only mean if it *should* turn out that an error has been made, as I shouldn't be surprised if it did, we can soothe Miss French with some of this blackmail stuff. Tell her it was police-protection arrest, or something——"

He tailed off under his subordinate's respectful but quelling eye, and waved him to continue.

"I thought I'd keep my eye on Miss Plimmon," went on the inspector. "In the first place, she had hold of a very queer little bit of information which has never been mentioned by any of the others. She told me that two men who sat in the back of the court at the inquest were parties interested in the case, one being the father of the deceased and the other one the father of the child she was going to have. And then, sir, there was another thing struck me as very peculiar. Miss Plimmon declared she heard somebody leave Miss French's room at just after midnight."

"Miss French, presumably. It only adds up to the total we made a quarter of an hour or so ago."

"Oh, her night on the tiles you mean, sir?" said the inspector, intending no particular coarseness. "Yes, that's right enough and she may have been speaking the truth, but she's got no corroboration, not at present."

"Couldn't Miss Smithers corroborate?"

"Well, I'm sort of saving Miss Smithers up, sir," said the inspector, with a blush. "Don't want too much rehearsal of the evidence beforehand. And there was another thing, too," he added, before his superior could comment. "Miss Plimmon let Miss Smithers go first into the room where the body was. Do you think there was anything in that, sir?"

"Not a lot, no, on the face of it. After all, Miss Smithers was better acquainted with Miss Francis and Miss French than Miss Plimmon could have been. No, there's nothing much in that."

"Nor that Miss Smithers was the person to find the corpse, sir?"

"No, not as far as I can see. Anything more about Miss Plimmon?"

"No, sir. But I don't like her. In fact, I have seldom struck a type of lady I disliked more."

The chief constable smiled.

"It might not be a bad idea to keep an eye on her," he agreed.

"Then, sir, there's this Miss Mortimer," said Jervis, patiently re-introducing her into the conversation in spite of the chief constable's restiveness.

"The suicide woman. Yes. Her view was the victim—that Miss Francis—was insane, and committed suicide. While the balance of the mind, etc. Quite. A tenable theory, too, you know, Jervis——"

"Except for the way the murder was committed," said the inspector. The chief constable looked at him oddly.

"Yes, the way the murder was committed," he repeated. "Tell me, Jervis, is this Miss French of yours really such a brutal specimen?"

"As what, sir?"

"Why, as to stifle and then strangle the victim. Beastly sort of murder, Jervis, you know. Something very vengeful about it, somehow."

"Yes, sir." The inspector looked up stolidly. "As you say. As to her being exactly brutal, I don't know, sir, I'm sure. She don't care overmuch for the children she teaches, but then you couldn't expect that, I suppose. And she drinks and smokes——"

"Not exactly murderous vices," commented the

chief constable. "What was that about Miss Smithers leaving the railway tickets behind at her lodgings, or something?"

"Yes, that's right. The old girl did say that, which no one else thought to mention. There's one thing struck me just a bit queer about that, though. Why Miss Smithers? I shouldn't hardly have expected the junior member of the party to be responsible for any of the more important items, sir. Should you?"

"No. But women are odd. Still, you might make a point of asking Miss Smithers about it. You'll have to comb these women's hair pretty thoroughly for them, Jervis, now you've arrested one of them, you know."

"Yes, sir. Not that I reckon they know much more than they've said."

"That's not true, you know, Jervis. People always know more than they say. The difficulty is to get it out of them. Here you've got four women of varying ages, anything from twenty to nearly sixty, all with their private lives, their private worries, their private fears and expectations and hopes—why, we haven't really touched on their private lives at all. What's that young girl Smithers really like? What's her home background? What does she really think about this business of the murder? Who did it, in her opinion?—Because, dash it, Jervis, they must all have an opinion, even the one who wanted to call it suicide."

"As I said, sir, I think they've all fastened on Miss French, the same as I did. That young Miss Smithers was a bit upset when I arrested French,

but, then, that's just her age. Young women are always soft, unless they're as hard as nails. And she may have thought she'd helped me. Anyhow, she cried a bit, and offered to follow French up with the things she wanted, and told her not to say another word until she'd got a lawyer."

"Head screwed on the right way, in spite of the upset, evidently," said the chief constable. "Then this Plimmon woman. She may know more than she's told us."

"And she may invent more than she knows," retorted the inspector, turning over his notes. "I wouldn't trust her an inch, sir. She's like a blinking earthworm——"

"Probably without its perfect digestive faculties, though," the chief constable observed, looking longingly out at his garden, and then resolutely hitching his chair round and scowling in thought as though his mind had not lapsed from the murder.

"I know nothing about her digestion, sir," said the inspector. "The only one that I *know* has internal troubles is this Miss Mortimer."

"Yes. We shan't get much more from her, I rather fancy. What about Joe Herberd's story that Kiddons was drunk in the bar that night? And, by the way, *does that connect up at all with the tale that Kiddons told you about that motor-cyclist?*"

"I don't see—— Oh, you mean the five bob, sir?"

"I do. And what's more, my dear chap, that five bob proves the sex of that motor-cyclist better than anything else I can think of at the moment. What does a woman, bless her!—think the male

sex is here for? Well, apart from our obvious biological function, they think we're here to be hewers of wood and drawers of water and take on the dirty, hard, heavy jobs which they either can't do or won't. Further to that, they have the crust to imagine that their smiles alone will reward us. Mind you, translate the smile, and the payment is munificent, but women's smiles in this civilised age, my dear fellow, are merely a token payment, say what you like. If not, the police run 'em in, and sometimes us as well. What did you say?"

The inspector had said nothing, but, reflecting that the Upper Ten, among whom he classed his superior, were always coarse, he decided to speak, if only as a means of getting the chief constable away from the topic he had chosen. In this, however, he was unsuccessful, for his cold enquiry: "I don't see this gets us anywhere with the motor-bike, does it, sir?" was answered with a hearty laugh from his delighted host, a further lifting of the decanter and the response:

"I simply meant, my dear fellow, that if a motor-cyclist gives a vagrant, poaching, evil-looking devil five bob, that motor-cyclist can't be a woman. Women, as I was saying——"

"Yes, sir," said the inspector. "I take your point." He turned it over in his slow, tenacious mind while the chief constable watched him. "Not only her female meanness, as you were pointing out, sir, but she wouldn't, in a lonely place like that, be wanting Kiddons to know she was carrying money."

"Well, he's a beastly looking fellow at the best of times," said the chief constable. "No, I should

be inclined to tax that young schoolmaster, Walter, with being the motor-cyclist, Jervis. Go up and have a look at him. Girlish-looking bloke, with red hair."

"Red hair, sir?"

"May not be so, of course. But if he was mistaken so readily for Miss French, I shouldn't be surprised if colouring had something to do with it."

"He was wearing a fur-lined helmet, sir," said the inspector. "And why, sir, should Miss French have got herself stuck in the quarry when she took those children out? It seemed as though she wanted to have a look at that side-car."

"Well, why not? If she slept with the fellow— Although, mind you, I've got another idea about that motor-cycle combination. Now, this boy Walter—"

"She—but, look here, sir, the chap's Miss Smithers's age, and Miss French is getting on for thirty."

"Doesn't matter. And now there's another thing, Jervis."

He tapped the bulky dossier before him. The inspector waited, but his superior's mind appeared to have wandered, for he leaned back in his chair and suddenly shouted with laughter. Among the gusts of mirth which shook him, the inspector could distinguish the word 'hussy,' a bright leaf of a word blown on a gale of laughter.

He sat up straight at last, and wiped his eyes. He begged the inspector's pardon. Then he affronted that long-suffering officer once more by asking, apropos of nothing which had gone before :

"Didn't ask the girl Dorrie what kind of dirt, I suppose?"

"What *kind* of dirt, sir?" said the inspector, dreading another dissertation on the methods of Sherlock Holmes. The chief constable nodded.

"I suggest you would find a study of the dirt on that garment instructive, Jervis," he said. "Pyjamas, was it, or a night-dress?"

"Does it matter, sir?"

"No, no. Well, it has its point, that question, not a detective-story point exactly, though. Strange thing, human nature, Jervis."

The inspector, with the mental reservation that if his superior's human nature was in question, the adjective 'strange' was not the one to employ, grunted assent and said perplexedly:

"You've got something up your sleeve about those night-clothes, sir."

"Do you know, Jervis, I only know of one classic work in which they are called night-clothes? And that's the *Beggar's Opera*, where the old rogue Peachum suggests to the old drab who keeps the gaming house that he make her a present of a suit of night-clothes. 'Suit' you notice, Jervis, including, I presume, the night-cap as well as the gown. Of course, the famous anachronism in *Julius Caesar*——"

"Yes, sir," said the inspector, goaded to the point of interrupting this literary monologue, "I'll see young Dorrie again, and see what else she can tell me."

"Yes, yes, what!" said the chief constable, coming out of his pleasant reverie. "Queer how people's habits give them away. Well, well, never

mind that now, as you were saying. Now, what about those Scouts you rounded up?"

"Ah, yes, the Boy Scouts, sir," said the inspector. He betrayed a little more enthusiasm. "You realise, sir, that my idea Miss French and the motorcyclist were one and the same is based on the evidence offered by those two lads? Apart from anything Kiddons may have told me, I mean?"

"Perfectly," said the chief constable. "But, before you begin, I'll make a suggestion which is so obvious that it hasn't occurred to you. Why don't you question the little girls about Miss French? If the other helpers are playing 'possum' for their own reasons, and won't say whether Miss French was or was not on the train, there's no reason for the children to hedge. She must have had a compartment full of 'em. Dig up the children, Jervis, dig up the children."

"Don't care for the idea, sir, in a murder case."

"Murder case be sugared! You ain't going to ask them anything about Miss Francis. In fact, you needn't seem to be questioning them at all. Just get hold of one or two, and work the point in while you talk to 'em like an uncle. It's easy enough. They'll be only too glad to tell you everything they know. You know what little girls are."

"Yes, sir," said the inspector, very doubtfully.

"They're a lot more reticent than boys."

"Not a bit of it! Not a bit of it! Gossip like a lot of little starlings, give 'em a chance," said the chief constable, who knew nothing at all about it. "Now then, about these Boy Scouts."

"Yes, sir," said the inspector. "First point : about the red hair. The boy Bert declared that no hair was to be seen, the motor-cyclist wearing one of those fur-lined helmets, as I pointed out just now."

"Ah, yes. But the boys suggested, too, that the man might have been Miss French's brother," said the chief constable, unwilling to concede the point.

"But we can't bring her brother into it, sir. Why should we?" objected the inspector.

"Why shouldn't we?" said the chief constable. "After all, come to think of it," he added, enthusiastically adding brick to brick like a child building a house upon a very precarious foundation, "there's no reason why her brother shouldn't be the father of Miss Francis's—I mean Mrs. Waterbury's—child. But never mind, Jervis. You stick to your boys, and I'll back my own opinion. Whoever that motor-cyclist was, I *know* he was a man, and that clears Miss French so far as it goes."

"Her brother, sir! You've got something there!" said the inspector, with a sudden quickening of interest.

"And, you see," said the chief constable pressing home his advantage with little squirts from the decanter into his own glass, "there *is* that point which you took up so ably with those lads, that it was not Miss French, but Miss Smithers, who selected the *Rose and Thorn*."

"There's nothing to show that Miss French hadn't tipped her off about it, though," said the inspector. "Well, you've given me something to concentrate on, sir," he added.

“Well, I hope it wasn’t Miss French—or her brother,” the chief constable observed, “because——” he flicked ash off the cigarette he had lighted, paused delicately, and then apparently decided not to say it after all.

XII

The Story Told by the Publisher



THE INSPECTOR CREPT UPSTAIRS, BUT HIS WIFE, although she had obeyed instructions so far as to go to bed, was wide awake and waiting for him.

"Phew! Whisky!" she announced with wifely disapproval followed by her jolly laugh; and then, as he began to take off his collar: "Well, what are you so miserable about? Didn't that harpy do it, after all?"

"Harpy!" said the inspector, fixing on the word, whilst he neatly draped his tie over front and back of the dressing-table mirror. "The old fathead's going to marry her. Good as told me so."

His wife sat up in bed.

"Don't put that collar in the drawer, dear. The laundry goes to-morrow. Going to marry her! I didn't know he'd seen her!"

"He hasn't," replied the inspector, taking money out of various pockets and laying it in tidy piles beside his wife's dressing-table tray. "But he's gone on her all the same. *Do* young women shed their reach-me-downs before they go off to someone's bedroom in a hotel?"

"No use asking me," said his wife with a fat,

contented gurgle. "You married me before I'd had my fling."

"I'm serious," said the inspector, removing his waistcoat and placing it carefully on the back of a bedroom chair. "She got out of 'em, leaving 'em on the floor at the foot of the bed, right in the fairway between the door and the bed of the murdered girl, and the murderer put his muddy foot on 'em as he walked across to do the murder."

He undid his braces with such energy that a button flew off his trousers and hit the dressing-table mirror.

"You've never thought him quite all right in the head, though, Henry," said his wife.

"Yes, but I shall have to ask the girl——"

"Oh, no, you needn't. Get hold of Dorrie. She'll know all about it, I daresay. Although," she pursued, seeing the thing, as women do, from her own point of view entirely, "I can't see myself walking down hotel corridors with nothing on, somehow. Did she have a dressing-gown, I wonder? She must have had, although, really, if you heard what landladies say about some of these girls' luggage—no wonder they can come away for a fortnight with only one small suit-case!"

She lapsed into laughter again, and advised him to come to his bed. Instead he sat down on the end of it, his braces dangling, his large hands dropped between his knees, his powerful body slouched forward, the picture of irritation and despair.

"It's all gone wrong," he said, "and I thought I'd worked it out so carefully."

"I expect you're quite right, too," replied his wife, with the loyalty which kept them so closely

allied, in spite of their almost grown-up children. He shook a heavy head, and, staring at the carpet—his last Christmas present to the house; they had always had linoleum and rugs before, and he had stumbled only by accident upon the fact that, ever since her wedding day his wife's ambition had been for a carpet, and a good one, in the bedroom—he replied with the open-minded honesty which had helped him to gain promotion.

"No; he put his points all right. It needn't have been that red-head. Thinks the motive too thin, and——"

"But that's quite easily looked into," said his wife. "Why don't you take a day off and go up to Town and see this girl's publishers? Wouldn't they know how much of a motive it was?"

"How do you mean? I don't see . . ."

"Yes, you do, Henry. Look here: suppose this girl isn't known, hardly, by her books. Would it be such a very good motive?"

The inspector slowly turned his head, and saw a comely, in fact, a handsome woman of forty, lying back against pillows, the lamplight warm and glowing on neck and cheek and arm. He got up and lumbered to the door.

"Have a wash, then I'm coming to bed, and to hell with all red-haired cats," he said, with some vigour.

Next morning, however, reviewing his wife's proposition, he found it good. He went to the police station, and told the sergeant to bring Miss French to his room.

For one who had spent the night in a cell devoted,

when it was used at all, to the detention of the drunk and disorderly, Miss French looked astonishingly spruce. There was also a glint in her eye which her new experience of being arrested for murder obviously could not tame.

"Now what?" she observed. "The cart and the drop, I suppose?"

"Now, now, miss," said the inspector. "Take a seat. No, have the arm-chair, do. Have you had any breakfast this morning?"

"Bacon, eggs, tomato, fried bread, toast, butter, marmalade, two cups of tea and a plate of watercress," replied the lady, ticking off the items. "Sent across by the sergeant's wife," she added calmly. "That's one thing about these up-country gaols. They are run on much more democratic lines than the prisons of the great metropolis. Now when I was in Holloway for baby-farming . . ."

"Now, look here, miss," said the inspector, seeing his opening and glad to cut short the teasing, "talking of the great metropolis, I want an address from you."

"You naughty lad!" observed the lady, even more facetiously than before. "I thought you policemen knew all those places," she added. "I say, inspector, do you carry a hip-flask or anything about with you? I don't see how I can mention it to the sergeant, brotherly though he is, but really I ought to have my elevenses soon."

"What you ought to have soon," thought the inspector, with unwilling admiration, "is a damn' good thrashing." Aloud he said: "Well, miss, we shall be able to get your elevenses on the train.

On second thoughts I'd better take you with me. Then you can satisfy yourself what I get up to," he concluded with what he thought was a neat and happy retort. Apparently Miss French thought so too, for, emitting the short but expressive sound "Wow!" she informed him further that he was quite priceless and that she would not for worlds have missed meeting him.

"But, you know, inspector, I'm not half in a spot, all the same."

"I'll say you are, miss," agreed the inspector, parentally. "What you were thinking of to leave your what's-its on the bedroom floor for everybody to walk on, I can't think!"

The result of this was the first moral victory he had scored over Miss French. She goggled like a goldfish, went suddenly scarlet, gulped twice, and then said, in the smallest, most stricken voice he had heard since he had caught his daughter, aged seven, methodically boring holes down the length of the garden hose:

"I—didn't think you knew about that."

"Oh, you didn't, didn't you?" said the inspector, pressing home this advantage. "And hearing it rain!" he added, laughing heartily.

"Oh, shut *up*!" said Miss French. The inspector grinned and, metaphorically raising his hat to the chief constable in gentlemanly admiration of his perspicacity, altered his expression and said sternly:

"And how much trouble it would have saved ourselves and you, miss, if you had seen fit to confess frankly you wasn't—weren't—in that room at all when the murder was done!"

To this she had nothing to say, except, with amazing meekness :

"What address was that which you wanted ?"

"Your publishers, miss, in London." She stared at him dismayed.

"Oh, no, damn it all, inspector ! You can't drag *them* into this ! They'd die of fright ! They're fearfully Victorian and respectable. They'd never publish another thing I wrote ! My stock's not all *that* high, you know."

"I'm sorry, miss," said the inspector, "but I'll have to take you along. You're under arrest, remember."

"I'm going to have a lawyer," said Miss French, speaking with sudden shrillness. "I'm not going to London with a long, thin, middle-aged policeman without my lawyer's consent. I'll——"

"Now, now ! Come, come, miss," said the inspector soothingly. "It's no use to call me names. And I'm sure you'd rather come quiet than have the sergeant escort us on to the train. Come, don't cry, miss," he added, embarrassed, as Miss French showed signs of breaking. "You don't want to be hanged for a nasty messy murder you never did, now do you ? But I've got to prove you never did it, and visiting your publishers is just a part of my routine. But if you choose, so long as you give me the address, you can stay right here, and the sergeant's wife shall bring you your dinner over, and I'll send out for your elevenses myself."

In the end the inspector did go alone, the address on the back of one of Miss French's visiting cards. The lady herself was put on what the inspector

called 'partial parole'—Miss French, with her nice appreciation of the English language, translating it her way, the inspector entirely in his own.

The junior partner of the publishing firm was in his office, and after a twenty minutes' wait in a downstairs room which he shared with three young ladies variously occupied, a stamp-licking youth with a supercilious expression and a habit of referring to the firm as 'Us,' the inspector was taken upstairs by a secretary referred to by the youth as 'Our Miss Campbell,' and was left to deal with the publisher as best he might.

The room into which he was shown appeared to house little besides a large desk, its appendant chair, one other chair (on which the inspector sat) and a very long, wide, white, marble mantelpiece on which were crowded books of all sizes and in a great variety of coloured wrappers. There was a box of cigarettes on the desk, and a good rug on the floor. There were also visible a telephone and a small electric fire.

"Inspector Jervis?" said the publisher, an extremely thin young man whose business manner was so completely overlaid (thought the inspector) by Eton and Cambridge that he would be (went on the inspector, probably unjustly) a very slippery customer to tackle. "You didn't come to see me about your memoirs, inspector, did you? Because, interested though I should be, I ought in fairness to tell you . . ."

"No, sir, nothing like that," interposed the inspector hastily. "I came, sir, to ask your assistance in a little matter affecting an accusation of murder."

"Of murder?" said the publisher. He swung round a little from his desk, crossed one beautifully trousered leg on the other with no regard (thought the inspector, who, curious although he now thought it when he looked back on those times, had been dressy himself in his youth) for the most wonderful creases in London, leaned forward, smiled invitingly, and added, with voluptuous enjoyment, "Ah!"

"Yes, sir," said the inspector without emotion. "It hasn't got into the papers much at this end. It's pretty local at present—we've seen to that—but the long and short is that I've got your Miss French up my sleeve—*did* have her, at all events, for a time—as the one that did it, and I should be glad, sir, of a few particulars about the young lady, if quite convenient."

"Miss French? Murder? Yes. I'll tell you what, inspector, you know. I shouldn't be surprised if you're right."

"No, sir, I'm not right," said the inspector patiently. "Would you give me some details, sir, about the sale of her books?"

"Yes, of course." He pressed a bell. "Miss Campbell, the F file, Sales. Cigarette, inspector? She'll be some time. It's in the basement. No lift here. Very old-fashioned office, but a good address. Did you notice the staircase as you came up? I rather like the staircase. Now do tell me what it's all about. I might tell *you*, in confidence, that from our point of view, Miss French is—how shall I put it——?"

"A bit of a washout, sir? Don't sell very much?"

"She doesn't sell at all," said the publisher,

trying to sound perplexed, but oozing the kind of self-satisfaction which, even in a share-pusher, would have been redundant, the inspector could not help feeling. Nevertheless, he liked this smart, thin, impressively spectacled young man. "We bought Birdie's, you know," the publisher went on, "and took over all their inheritance. You know, a minor classic or two, a bit of Louisa M. Alcottia, some illustrated stuff that people buy for Christmas for the kind of people to whom otherwise they'd give an Omar Khayyám—just like peddling pots and pans, or going round with a scissors-grinding contraption. I shall always say——"

"Yes, sir," said the inspector, thinking of his four-thirty train, "but Miss French's books, I take it, were not exactly like that? No sale at all, I think you said."

"She never covers her advances," said the publisher. "Not that we mind that at all," he continued, waving his hand. "I am out for good books, never mind the sales."

"Are Miss French's books good?" enquired the inspector, fearing another lecture and popping in the question where he thought he saw an opening.

"Well, I should call them just so-so," said the publisher, with a cordiality which the inspector could scarcely contrive to associate with those words. "Extremely so-so, in fact. Crude, of course, crude."

He stopped, as though the criticism had reached its height and anything more would be not only redundant but in bad taste.

"Indeed, sir," said the inspector. "Then to you

Miss French would hardly be what we might call"—he smiled nervously—"a business proposition. Now what about to herself? My meaning being," he continued, talking fast as he saw the publisher's eye light up, "did she make a worth-while business out of writing? Was it—what satisfaction, financially, would she get out of it, say?"

"That's what we want the file for, isn't it?" said the publisher, as the secretary walked in carrying it. "Now, Miss Campbell, what have we?"

"*The List Says Murder*, by Ursula French," said the secretary in a ladylike way. "Published on February the seventh. Sales up to the end of June, six hundred and thirty-one copies in the seven and sixpence at ten per cent, plus ninety-three Overseas at ten per cent of two shillings——"

"What's that in el ess dee, sir?" said the inspector.

"What's that in el ess dee, Miss Campbell?" said the publisher, with the exquisite courtesy of the man who imbibes from finger-bowls. The ladylike secretary, still calm, observed that the total appeared to be roughly twenty-three pounds, twelve shillings and sixpence, plus ninepence which made it twenty-three pounds, thirteen shillings and threepence, didn't it?—plus the Overseas—let's see, that would be about five times forty-five over two hundred and forty, that——" She bent and scribbled on her employer's blotting paper—"fifteen-sixteenths of a pound, yes, well, say twenty-four pounds twelve as a final total."

"And will she get much more as they go on selling?" the inspector enquired, having made a

note of the figures. He had tried to follow the working, but decided that he had better check Miss Campbell's arithmetic as soon as he was peacefully in the train. He had an idea, though, that it would prove to be correct.

"Not another ninepence, my dear inspector," replied the publisher, as though this fact gave him great pleasure. "Detective stories, you see. Dead as a door-nail—deader—inside the first six weeks. No, that will be the sum total until we bring out a cheap edition—if we do. What do you think, Miss Campbell?"

"Well, we sold her last cheap edition, practically all of it, to the——"

"Rag, bottle and bone man. So we did," said her employer hastily. "Yes, thanks, Miss Campbell. You might, when you put the file back, tell Morris to call me as soon as he's finished down below. We must write to Bee Glory Weathers about that book she promised us for the spring. Have to look ahead," he added to the inspector, when Miss Campbell, taking the file, had gone and another girl had come in with a tray of tea and biscuits. "Cup of tea, inspector? I always have one about now."

Whilst he was pouring out the inspector put his next question.

"Suppose, sir," he said, "that Miss French really *had* committed this murder, would the publicity of the trial, and so on, make any difference to her sales?"

The publisher put down the tea-pot, lit a cigarette, sat back and gave the question his most pronounced attention and interest. Then he shook his head.

"I don't see it. I don't see it at all," he said, in a slightly moaning voice. "No, I really can't see it. Some people might be fortunate under the circumstances, but Ourselves"—he shook his head—"I really do doubt it. We've done our best to build her up, of course. We have a very deep personal interest in all our authors, not like some publishing houses I could mention to you, who, quite frankly, inspector, do not know a single one of their authors even by sight!—But a trial for murder? I doubt very much if it would help. With a medium best-seller it *might*—I shall ask our travellers what they think—they have the literary pulse of the public much more at their finger-tips than we have—in fact, I don't mind telling you that if my travellers damn a book I don't send it out at all; and as for titles—Still, I mustn't take your time; I've got a date for half-past four and it's twenty to."

"So you're really certain that for anybody in Miss French's position, publishing as she does with your firm, a big publicity stunt like a murder trial wouldn't really help to sell her books?"

The publisher smiled. "We have been established, on and off, since seventeen eighty-seven," he said. "Our founders would turn in their graves. Besides, it's a bit of a boomerang, that kind of thing," he added thoughtfully.

XIII

The Story Told by the Literary Agent



THERE WAS ANOTHER ADDRESS ON ANOTHER OF THE visiting cards which Miss French had given to the inspector, and, taking a taxi, he was, in six minutes, turned out on to a grimy pavement by the remark :

“ Number Seventy-three you said, sir.”

Miss French's agent lived up three flights of stairs. On the ground floor was what appeared to be a horse-box complete with the smell of hay and other equine matters, on the first floor a tailor's with *Cohen, Please Knock One for Trade* painted on the door, and on the second floor was a social club, inhabited, at the time of the inspector's visit, by a girl in a backless blouse and two young men with tight waists to their coats, marcel waves on their heads and breath which almost sent the inspector staggering, so compounded was it of the mixture of garlic, cachous and alcoholic refreshment, apparently in equal parts.

Passing this haunt of vice and wondering what the Metropolitan police ever did about it (if anything) he still mounted until he came upon a door bearing a brass plate which he had to strike a match to decipher. It was, however, clean and brightly

polished, and reported that Tillington Burn and Bernard Thatchett wished callers not to ring or knock.

The inspector pushed open the door, only to find himself confronted by a second one, painted white instead of dark brown and inscribed *Enquiries*. Here there was a bell, which he pressed with an already prejudiced thumb. There was no answer, so he pressed it again, and thought he could hear the sound of a typewriter from within. As his second summons also went unregarded he turned the brass handle of the door and entered a small room partitioned off from a larger one.

This small room was occupied by a tousle-haired man in a sort of porter's uniform who sat on a small table reading the racing results, a young girl who was pounding the typewriter and another young girl who was carrying on a conversation with the first and was, apparently, trying on hats. At least, there were seven hats in the room, and five of them appeared to be new ones. The room, in fact, seemed completely smothered in hats. They dominated the two girls, and only failed to dominate the man because he rose above them, from his seat on the table, like Venus rising from the waves which, in this case, were carried out in fluff, froth, ribbons and what by the inspector's unenlightened mind were designated in a general, non-selective manner, thing-me-tights. All these billowed about him, in a confusing, irritating way.

The inspector, of whom no one took the very slightest notice, advanced to the table and said :

" Who's in charge in this office ? "

"Want to see Mr. Burn?" enquired the typist, suspending operations whilst her companion, discarding the fourth hat, picked up the fifth. "He's out."

"Mr. the other one will do," said the inspector.

"Mr. Thatchett? Killed on the Great West Road last Thursday week," said the other girl, now in the throes of the fifth hat.

"Then I'll have to wait," said the inspector.

"You can't wait in here. Take him into the Garrick Room, Fred," said the typist. "I suppose you've got an appointment?"

"I'm here to investigate a murder," replied the inspector curtly. "Which way?"

Having been shown the next room, he was then regaled for thirty-five minutes by the chatter from the other side of the partition. Angry about his lost train, the lack of civility so far shown him and the idle gossip and silly exclamations which came to his ears all the time without a pause, he was rewarded at last by hearing the sound of the opening of the outer door.

He looked round, expecting to see Mr. Burn, but when, as the new arrival entered, he pronounced this name, the new-comer merely stared rudely, hitched up the skirts of an overcoat which had seen better days, put his hat on the floor by the side of the chair he had taken and said, with peevish contempt: "Good Lord, I'm not Burn."

The inspector then stared round the room. It contained no furniture whatever except a small glass-topped table, a portrait of David Garrick, and a glass ashtray. This was empty, but there was a

considerable amount of cigarette ash on the floor and two or three stubs in the grate.

When Mr. Burn did return to the office it was twenty minutes to five, and he had come in with the object, it seemed, of locking up and going home. This object it was the peculiar pleasure of the inspector to frustrate. He waited whilst the rude young man in the shabby coat buttonholed Mr. Burn and poured out a hard-luck story. Mr. Burn, having rid the office of what seemed an unwelcome presence by handing over a cheque for twelve pounds ten, turned on the inspector and said blandly :

"I'm sure I don't remember an appointment. Call again to-morrow, old man—or, no, wait a minute ! Not to-morrow."

"I can't call to-morrow or any other day," said the inspector. "I'm here on business, not touting. I'm investigating a nasty case of murder. Here's my card."

Mr. Burn, who wore a lavender-coloured lounge suit and the tie of his old school, said :

"Oh, ah ?" in an ineffective manner, returned the card for which the inspector stretched out a hairy paw, said, "Oh, ah," again, even less determinedly, and then thought better of it and added : "Really ?"

"Yes, Mr. Burn," said the inspector. "Now you have on your books, as I understand from the lady herself, a Miss Ursula French, detective-story writer. Is that so ?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Burn, "that is so. But I can't discuss my client's business, you know."

"Oh, yes, you can. You're not a bank manager," retorted the inspector rudely. Mr. Burn grinned.

"Oh, yeah?" he remarked in delicate tones. "Did you see that fellow who was in here just a minute ago? Did you see me give him money?"

"Yes," the inspector admitted.

"Yes, well, he's one of our authors," said the young man, shrugging elegant shoulders. "If that's not being a banker, I don't know what is. That fellow has made me over all his potential earnings for the next twenty years. It's no good to me at all, because he never earns anything. But there it is."

The inspector who was beginning, he thought, to understand why *Alice in Wonderland* was great literature, said he could not understand the arrangement exactly, but that it didn't sound much like business.

"Of course it isn't business," said Mr. Burn irritably. "But what can you do? If authors find out that other authors can't get advances on their advances, you might as well give up being an agent at all, and take to selling cabbages in Covent Garden market."

The inspector mildly observed that it sounded a more profitable proposition. Mr. Burn took up the word 'profitable' and announced that it was not possible, ever, to make a profit in the world of books. Nobody, he protested, ever made a profit—the author was the luckiest; he merely had to write the beastly things. The publisher was lucky if he got off with a net loss of fifty per cent on his outlay; the agent was the sole financial support of both author and publisher, and got no thanks from

anybody, but was grudged his ten per cent no matter what he did, and as for the booksellers . . .

The inspector would have enjoyed prolonging this conversation, but his own business demanded his attention. Taking advantage of the dramatic pause made by his companion after the word 'booksellers' he broke in with :

"And, tell me, please, Mr. Burn, did Miss French conduct her affairs in that sort of way? Borrowing on her expectations, and all that?"

"Miss French? Oh, no. You see, she's that bane of an agent's existence, a woman with money of her own. Earns it or something, I believe."

The inspector could not see why this foible of Miss French's should upset Mr. Burn, and said so.

"No hold on her, you see," explained Mr. Burn. "Wretched woman publishes a book a year, more or less, gets an advance of thirty pounds on it, we take three of that for our ten per cent cut-in, and odds and ends for American copyrights, translation rights, first and second serial rights, 'Sunday papers please copy' rights, acting, broadcasting, Scandinavian, war risks and flood, fire and non-indemnity rights, and the author takes the rest. Morbid, whichever view you take," he concluded. The inspector, as fascinated by this young man's conversation as he would have been had someone taken him to the sea-bed in a diving suit and given him the power to listen to the conversation of fish, anemones and sea-weed, remembered his duty and reintroduced his own business.

"My point is this, Mr. Burn," he said.

Mr. Burn glanced in agony at his wrist-watch,

muttered : " My God ! Fenell's cocktail party ! " and turned towards the desk.

" Now, Mr. Burn," said the inspector, disregarding these manœuvres, " tell me this : suppose Miss French got herself mixed up in a nasty case of murder, would it help her sales ? "

" Why should it ? " said Mr. Burn, taking a small mirror from the top drawer of the desk and beginning to do his hair.

" Well, there's such a thing as advertisement," said the inspector.

" And there's such a thing as her publisher," returned Mr. Burn. " How do you think her publisher would react to an author who got herself shoved in the dock ?—or don't you mean as bad as that ? Because if not, it's not an advertisement, and if it is, her publisher wouldn't touch the publicity with the end of a rake," he concluded.

The inspector thanked him, and turned towards the door.

" I'll tell you what," said Mr. Burn, as the inspector got through the aperture to find the typists' room deserted and the hats all gone, " why don't you come round to Fenell's ? You'd enjoy it."

" I don't know the place," said the inspector. " And they can't be open yet."

" He's got a flat off Shaftesbury Avenue. It's not a pub or a club," Mr. Burn explained, putting away the comb, locking the desk and straightening his tie. " Come on. They'll fall on my neck for introducing somebody none of 'em have seen and who doesn't know anything about books."

The inspector, recollecting that there was a train at seven-thirty and that he could do with a drink, accompanied his new acquaintance and by seven o'clock, an hour at which most people (Fennell's guests having been invited, it seemed, for five-thirty) were beginning to arrive, he left the party with whirling head, unsteady legs, and a mazy feeling of having heard all that there was to be said about books and authors from Moscs and the Pentateuch onwards.

Once settled in the train he added up what, from his own point of view, he had gained from the two interviews. The motive on which so much had depended seemed to have melted away. If Miss French had nothing to gain in fame or money from the murder, what had she to gain?

'Must be a man in it somewhere,' thought the inspector, and, taking out his note-book, he went painfully, and with throbbing head—for Mr. Fennell's cocktails, whatever their crude foundation, were not suited to a palate grounded in whisky and beer—over the statement made by Mr. Waterbury.

He thought of Mr. Waterbury; then he thought of Miss French. Then he shook a head which had begun to feel as though its inside consisted only of the kaleidoscope shown at the cinema to advertise the beginning of the news, and sighed deeply before he went to sleep.

XIV

The Story Told by the Children



"I'LL INTERVIEW THE CHILDREN," SAID MRS. JERVIS. She had her hat and coat on and carried her shopping basket. "And I'll tell you *faithfully* what they say," she added. "Now what do you want me to ask?"

"Nothing, except whether Miss French came down on the train or not, and I know she did, and damn this case and blast my head," replied the inspector conclusively. "I'll have to look up that boy."

"What boy is that, dear? The Scout?"

"No. Young Walter, the schoolmaster."

"That means another journey. What a nuisance. Never mind," she added. "We've nearly got her cleared, poor girl; I feel sure of it."

The inspector glanced at her sharply, caught his breath at the sharper protest made by his morning head, and dismally agreed. His wife dropped a kiss on the thinnest patch of his hair, and went on her errand. She hailed the bus, and in twenty minutes was in Low Abbots' High Street.

The little town—a village really, except that it had its own park, the gift of a squire recently dead—

was pleasantly empty. A mare and a foal roamed the main street and a tramp took his casual path eastward, but sign of other life there was none.

Above the town, and forming a background to the statue of Benjamin Disraeli which, rightly or wrongly, dominated the High Street, the great hill lay like a crouching beast to the west.

No children were billeted along the High Street. It was short, wide, steep and commercial. The foster-homes lay to the south. The houses and cottages were mostly down in the valley, and were of grey or blackish stone, chilling the London hearts and eyes of the children, but dear to their inhabitants, who neither knew, nor wished to know, anything of bricks and mortar.

Mrs. Jervis looked about her, saw nothing but the mare, the foal and the tramp, and, leaving the statue of Disraeli on her right, took a side road which went sharply downhill. Fortunately the Cockney children, even without the talisman of their speech, were unmistakable. Mrs. Jervis soon saw a couple of little girls who were aimlessly loafing—or perhaps not aimlessly—towards the village shop. She quickened her pace a little, and, coming up with them, asked pleasantly :

“ Is there a picture palace here ? ”

“ No, lady,” said the pallid child she addressed.

“ Don’t you go to the pictures here, then ? ” she enquired.

“ Yus. Be bus,” said the second child, in hoarse, sepulchral tones.

“ What’s on this week ? ” enquired the inspector’s wife. Both children instantly informed her.

"Do your teachers take you?" she enquired.

"No. Don't believe in the pictures," said the first child. The second added a symposium of her teachers' qualities which appeared (if Mrs. Jervis heard aright) to commence with the expression 'lousy kites' and to go on with more interesting personal descriptions.

"And which teacher do you like best?" she enquired. Here opinions differed, but Miss French's name was not mentioned, so she herself introduced it.

"You came down in Miss French's compartment, didn't you?" she observed.

The children, who appeared to take for granted any interest, however impertinent and local, in their experiences, thoughts and actions, replied in concert that they had not.

"But Beatie Buffers did," volunteered the older and shorter of the two.

"Who?" said Mrs. Jervis.

"Beatie Buffers," they repeated. "She's in Miss Walsingham's class. Miss Walsingham haven't come down on the 'oliday because she said she couldn't stick us at school, let alone give up 'er 'oliday, but *we* know she've got a young man, because teachers what got a young man pleases themselves what they do, because if they gets the sack the young man marries 'em——"

"Our Ada's young man never," interpolated the younger child adroitly.

"But if they're single they 'ave to do what they're told in case they get the sack," said the speaker, with a nice sense of her teachers' position in the matter which considerably impressed Mrs. Jervis.

"So Miss French was on the train?" she said. "I heard she went down in a motor-car."

"She never. She was on the train all right, because Pammeler Willows was sick and Miss French got her head out of the window and said she was to be sick on the line and nowhere else," said the second child with the confidence usually betrayed only by the divinely inspired. "Pammeler Willows said Miss French said we was damned dirty little bastards," she concluded. Even to one who had heard as much about Miss French as Mrs. Jervis had, this seemed a little far-fetched, and Mrs. Jervis ignored it. Nevertheless, for her husband's sake she was determined to find out conclusively whether Miss French had really been on the train, and so, slightly changing the means of approach, she said:

"I suppose you were ever so excited on the morning that you were coming down here?"

"Oh, I dunno," said the elder child, with a critical wrinkle of the nose. "It was Bournemouth last year, and reely it sooted me better."

"Really?" said Mrs. Jervis. "But when you had to get up and go along to school on what was really a holiday morning, I expect you felt rather excited, didn't you?"

"Well, I 'ad a row wiv my mum before we started," said the child, "'cause she wanted our Shirley to go wiv me, and I said she couldn't. She wasn't down on the list."

"What did Shirley do? Didn't she want to come with you? I should think it was very difficult," said Mrs. Jervis, with sympathy.

"Not arf she never. And when I said I couldn't

take 'er 'cause they wouldn't 'ave 'er, my mum turned nasty and said: 'You shan't go neether, without you knows 'ow to wash your face and clean be'ind your ears.' So I washes me face and cleans be'ind me ears, and 'ucks 'em out wif the towel, and then I goes down to the 'all . . ."

"Didn't you have breakfast, then?" enquired Mrs. Jervis, with pity. The child regarded her contemptuously.

"You washes *after* breakfast, don't you?" she observed.

"And then you got to the hall," prompted Mrs. Jervis.

"And stuck about in the playground . . ."

"'Twasn't a playground. Gawd's Hacre," said her comrade, very formally.

"And then they let us come in, and we had our bags looked at, and our labels tied on, and was took be batches . . ."

"Were what?" said Mrs. Jervis, unwilling to allow any doubtful statement to pass.

"Took to the offices," explained the child.

"And was Miss French there then?"

"Yes, course she was, bossing the show, as usual."

"Who else was there?"

"Coupla old Lizzies we never seen before, and Miss Francis," replied the oracle.

"Are you sure Miss French was there? How do you know?"

"She clouted Connie Connor round the 'ear'ole, and promised 'er she shouldn't go without she shut 'er trap and stopped chewing Spearmint on one side 'er gob and butternuts the other."

"And wasn't Miss Smithers there, then?"

"Miss Smivvers come late, and all rushin' up and looks round to see if old Mother 'Ubbard was there, and when she see she weren't she says: 'Line up there, you gals,' and shoved us on a bus, and tried to look like she'd bin there all the time. Teachers don't arf get in rows if they're late," said the children, almost in chorus.

Mrs. Jervis nodded.

"And then the buses went off and you got on the train?" she suggested.

"I didn't arf laugh," said the younger child confidentially. (Mrs. Jervis tried in vain to imagine the same conversation held with two village children, but she could not.) These two began to edge towards the shop and she went with them. "Arfway down the steps there was a policeman, and 'e stopped Miss 'Ubbard what 'ad come up in 'er car, the draughty swine, and says she's got to show 'er voucher and she didn't 'ave no voucher, so 'e wouldn't let her pass, and she says my good man and that made 'im proper wild and serve 'er glad, the bastard pigmy. My bruvver said we ought to chuck a brick at 'er motor, but we didn't like because she's got a cane, and no one ain't 'ad it as yet. So she sent Miss Smivvers tearin' orf back to school for a spare voucher the caretaker 'ad just in case."

"I see," said Mrs. Jervis. "Come in and buy some sweets." That explained, then, the small point about Miss Smithers and the railway tickets, she supposed.

"Not me," said the older child curtly. "My muvver said they takes you away if they buys you

sweets, and I don't want for to be took away because you gets put to service, my muvver says, and I'm goin' in a factory, like our Muriel. But you can wait outside while we goes in, if you like."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Jervis, when they emerged and she had refused a generous offer of sweets from the younger child, "you don't know the girl who pulled the cord and stopped the train, do you?"

The children looked at one another. Then the elder said reluctantly, pointing at her companion: "It were 'er."

"Really?" said Mrs. Jervis. "Tell me all about it!"

"Garn! Don't yer!" advised the older child, with anxious loyalty. "She might be a lousy lady policeman. You can't gammon them like you can the old bobbies, neether."

"Did the guard come along?" asked Mrs. Jervis, reflecting, with her usual humour, that a lady policeman was what she was at the moment.

"Miss French she come along first," admitted the younger child. "She said which of us done it and they all said me, so I 'ad to own up and she said: 'Five pounds Fine Up Your Shirt and I hope you like it,' and then she went back and we 'eard 'er laughing fit to bust with Miss Francis, and then the train stopped a long time and the guard come along and said: 'Oo pulled the chain?' And I said I did and 'e said: 'What the 'ell for?' And I said I thought it was the Chain, and 'e went away soon and the teachers was still laughin' and that was all."

"I see. And then you stopped again—I mean the train did—and you all had buns and milk."

"Milk and *worter*!" said both children immediately and loudly. "It was blue," the younger one added. "Pile blue," said the elder sardonically. "I never drunk minc. I poured it out on the platform and it all splashed up on the train. The buns was all right. We et them, and Joan Gollup 'ad the 'iccups."

"We all 'ad the 'iccups time she finished," volunteered the younger child sedately. "Then we played kickin' bottoms and then the train stopped and we all got out and lined up."

"And Miss French was still there?" enquired the inspector's wife, painfully pursuing.

"Oh, she was there. Not arf. Our line was the first to lead off, and we got the last motor," said the elder child distastefully. "Them soppy Annies from the secondary school got the motors first, although they come out last. Them and their soppy uniforms!"

"Oh? The Girl Guides," said Mrs. Jervis. "And then you got to the hall?"

"Yes, and we went there in motors. The old girl drove oun. She couldn't arf tell you orf. She told us to keep our sticky 'ands orf the cushions and she told us not to keep windin' and unwindin' the winders and she told us not to keep on breavin' on the glass, and she told Joan Gollup to keep 'er feet still, and she told me to take my coat orf the gears or suthick, and she kep' on tellin' us all the time."

"What a shame," said Mrs. Jervis, who was trying to make up her mind who, in New Abbots, was capable of such despotism.

"Yes, and she wasn't anyone who lived in the place, neether," observed the smaller, elder child. "Like 'er sauce, orderin' us about. She was met be her own car wiv 'er own man in it, and the man got out and she drove us. She was the old kite we see in the 'all. She come down with them soppy Girl Guides."

"Oh, Miss Mortimer!" said Mrs. Jervis, who had heard of this lady from the inspector. "Oh, yes, she came down with you in the train."

The conversation was ripe, she thought, for another attack.

"Let's see, then, there was Miss Mortimer—she's rather an elderly lady, isn't she?—"

"Old as a camel," said the larger, younger child with some success.

"Then there was Miss Plimmon——"

"She's barmy," said both children simultaneously.

"She's always chewin', but she don't 'ave nuthick in her mouth," explained the elder child.

"And she jerks 'er neck funny," added the younger one, "like the old barmy at 'ome what frows bricks at the trolley-bus drivers."

They appeared to have a good deal more to say on the subject of Miss Plimmon's oddities, but Mrs. Jervis skilfully headed them off.

"My uncle's wife's cousin is like that," she began; at which the children looked thoroughly bored and uncomfortable, fearing a long adult monologue of no possible degree of interest. They were therefore relieved and pleased when she continued: "And so you had no teacher in *your* compartment."

"Only Miss Smivvers," said the elder child.

"Oh? You had Miss Smithers, did you? I thought you said you had Miss French?" (She blushed for this mendacity.)

"Naow. We never 'ad 'er. We *see* 'er, though, now and then, and she turfed me out of their kerridge just before we got to the station of the buns and milk," said the younger child.

"She turfed *me* out before that," said the other proudly. "I went in soon's we'd 'ad our dinner and said to Cissie Lane to let's look out of 'er winder 'cause she 'ad a winder seat and we never, and Miss French says to get out and stay out, so I went. I didn't arf make a face at Cissie through the glass, though, and made 'er laugh."

"Do they know yet 'oo done Miss Francis in?" enquired the younger child.

"No, not yet. The police are working hard, though. I should think we'd soon know," replied Mrs. Jervis, who had too much common sense to dream of trying to change the subject without giving some sort of answer to the question she had been expecting and dreading.

"Pity it wasn't Miss French. Miss Francis was a nice teacher," said the child. "Did she 'ave all marks round 'er neck?"

"I didn't see her," replied the inspector's wife. "It's a good thing it didn't spoil your holiday."

"Don't call this an 'oliday," said the child, not in a discontented or grumbling tone, but with the simple directness of one who has her standards and knows when experiences fall short of them.

"What would you like, then?" asked Mrs. Jervis, wondering how much farther they were going

to walk, and how long she would have to wait for a bus to take her back to New Abbots.

"Sarfend," said both children. "Sarfend on a boat from Tower Pier, and dinner out of the snack bar, and fish supper when you gets there, and a tram down the pier, and the havin' pool, and whelks and cockles, and sausage in yer 'ands, and all that smell when the tide goes out, and sleep on the front if you can't get no lodgin's, and rows wiv the old girl if you do, and fun fairs, and penny in the slot, and goin' round to Margate on the steamer and everythink like that."

It certainly sounded attractive. Mrs. Jervis looked up at the hills and sensed that the country quietness might be a burden on the spirits of children accustomed day and night to noise and to hundreds of people.

"Miss French was on that train," she said to her husband that evening. The inspector, who had had another interview with Miss French, who was now officially at liberty, but had not gone back to her lodgings but was living at the sergeant's house, where the sergeant's wife had made much of her, nodded as he filled his after-supper pipe.

"I know," he said. "She's not a fool, and she would have been if she'd let that tike Kiddons see all he says he saw that morning. Besides, she couldn't have worked it, and those boys swear to the day. And I've changed my mind about young Walter. The motor-cyclist wasn't him. It was her brother, and he was up to mischief, and she knew it, and tried to lead us a dance at first, but then thought better of it. I've been trying to get at her

about it. She admits she's got a brother, says he's seven years younger than she is—that would account for the fact that she could be mistaken for him; women always look younger when they're got up to look like men—and when I tried to get out of her what he was doing in these parts she swore she didn't know; said she hadn't seen much of him lately; said she supposed he'd got his holiday, and probably took off the side-car because he was tired of it or had had a row with his girl. Further than that I can't budge her. She just pulls my leg and sticks like glue to that 'don't know, don't care, can't help it' style of talk that gets me nowhere."

"You'll have to have another go at Joe Herberd," said his wife.

"Yes, there's another one," said the inspector bitterly. "I *have* had another go at him. Can't get anything more at the *Rose and Thorn*. Of that I'm perfectly certain."

"You can find out who the—who Miss French's sweetheart was at the *Rose and Thorn* that night," suggested his wife, turning a Tudor expression into a Victorian one out of deference to her husband's prejudices about the kind of thing women should say.

"Not from Joe Herberd. He don't know any more than you do," said the inspector. Mrs. Jervis laughed.

"What will you bet on that, my old man?" she asked, giving him the matches for which he had stretched out his hand. Over the bowl of the pipe, the matchbox held loosely, as though he had forgotten he had it, the inspector stared at her.

"Plain as the nose on your face," continued his

wife. "Smoke your pipe and think it out, love, while I wash up the supper things."

By the time she came back the inspector had thought it out, but she could tell that he did not believe it.

"Poor Joe," said she, helping him gently. "After all, Emmy's all right, but she *has* had bad legs for fourteen years, and that seems rather rough on a hearty man like Joe. Of course, he couldn't let Emmy know. It would upset her."

"But—no, I can't swallow that! Why, he'd never even seen the girl until she turned up with the others at nine o'clock that night. I'll tackle Joe—but it won't be an easy job."

"Don't tackle Joe, dear. Tackle that permanent of theirs. I'll bet he knows all that goes on?"

"Come to think of it, I reckon I'll let it slide and have another go at Miss French. She's admitted, good as, she wasn't in the room with Miss Francis that night. *She* can tell me who the man was! I've got a better hold on her than ever I could get on old Joe."

"Yes," said his wife, "you cowardly old thing! And, you know, Henry, there are other people still you'll have to get at. If she didn't do the murder, who did?"

"That brother of hers, I tell you," said the inspector. "That would account for everything, including the various attempts she's made to keep me thinking she did do it. The brother could have known they were coming down to this place, and he could have lain doggo and found out which pub they were going to, and——"

"He couldn't have found out which bedroom Miss Francis—or Mrs. Waterbury, as I suppose she ought to be called—was going to sleep in, though. In fact it's ever so difficult to see who *could* have known that, except the people themselves at the *Rose and Thorn*."

The inspector laughed.

"Not much difficulty there, as I've had to realise all along," he said, "with those ladies, all of 'em tiddly, shouting the odds down the stairs. Of course, it's still possible that Miss French did do it. If she didn't, then Miss Plimmon, Miss Smithers or Miss Mortimer *could* have done, but my money now is on this brother, although, if that story told by Kiddons didn't sound so fishy, I'd wash that idea right out, because it hasn't come out that the chap even went inside the doors of the *Rose and Thorn*, and I've proved to my own satisfaction you can't break into that place. But still, don't you worry, my dear. I'll tackle Joe. I'll tell him I've got to know where he was at the time of the murder. I'll drop him a hint I know all about the girl, and see what he says. I'll make it easy for him, and I'll have to swear I won't let on to Emmy, but —Emmy!" He put the pipe in his mouth and cogitated. "Emmy," he repeated thoughtfully. "Jealousy of that sort is a very strong motive, you know, Minnie."

"Rubbish," said his wife, sharply. "You know she couldn't, any more than Joe."

"I'm not so sure," said the inspector. "I'm not so sure about that. I've seen Emmy with her dander up. She's not an easy customer."

"But why should she do such a thing? She couldn't have had a thing against Miss Francis. If she'd gone for anybody, it would have been Miss French," protested his wife. "Do you know who *I* think could have done it, Henry? That Miss Plimmon. The children say she's mad, and you thought so, too."

"I'll have a go at Miss French again, and then I'll tackle Joe," said the inspector. "Miss Plimmon?" He shook his head. "Blackmail and anonymous letters is *her* sort of look-out, not murder, poor old twirp."

XV

The Story Told by the Red-Headed Girl



"YES, I DID," SAID MISS FRENCH. THE INSPECTOR, with a satisfied nod, made a note. "But you needn't think it was anything to do with the murder," she amended.

"How do you explain his presence in the neighbourhood, then, miss? And getting rid of the side-car?"

"Easily. I had told him we were coming down here with these children, and he—we—at least, it was really my suggestion—thought it might be a chance for him and Marion to get together and discuss what they'd better do."

"Oh? Your brother knew Miss Francis, then?"

"Well, considering it was his baby she was going to have— Oh, it was all just silly! I mean they weren't in love, or anything like that, but she was deadly sick of that little Waterbury snake—I can't think why she married him, and she used to say she didn't know herself. I don't know how often she and Malcolm used to meet. They met at my flat, and it was ages afterwards that I found they'd been—like they were. I'm afraid I can't tell you much about it."

The inspector nodded, continuing to write very slowly in his neat, legible hand.

"When she knew she was in for this baby she had a fit, of course," Miss French continued. "She'd wanted one, but it was all so awkward. It wasn't as though either Waterbury or Malcolm could keep her if she got the sack from teaching, and the poor fool of a woman literally didn't know what to do. You see, it was only a matter of weeks before she had to ask for time off, and although, of course, she *might* have got away with calling it an operation or a nervous breakdown, she couldn't be certain she would. From something the head let drop, it seemed as though the row she had with Miss Mortimer was all about poor Marion and this baby.

"Well, I told Malcolm he'd have to do something, and suggested that it might be quite a good move to see her down here and try to straighten things out. He argued the point a bit—he's rather a rotter—and he said, quite truthfully, that there was no reason for her to divorce the Waterbury tick, and that Waterbury certainly wouldn't divorce her because he never cared what she did and just wouldn't bother himself, but that he, Malcolm, wasn't going to worry too much about it.

"Anyhow, it seems he did come down here on the Monday morning—he's rather like me to look at, and about my height, only broader—and got it into his silly head that he'd got to cover his tracks. You see, it turns out he's just got engaged to a girl with money, and he couldn't risk having her find out anything about Marion and the baby, or else, of

course, she'd have dropped him immediately. Sounds like something out of P. G. Wodehouse, except that it's neither funny nor respectable."

"I see, miss." The inspector put down his pencil. "Why didn't you come across with this before?"

"It didn't really arise. And I didn't believe you'd think the motor-cyclist was me when you'd worked it out and questioned the kids and so forth. You did question the kids, I suppose, to find out whether I was on the train?"

"My wife did," said the inspector. Miss French looked at him with approval.

"I call that very broad-minded of you, inspector," she said. Her glance melted. He realised that not only was she really very beautiful, albeit in what he considered a bold-coloured, cat-eyed way, but she was not as hard as she seemed, and neither did she dislike the children nor wash her hands of their interests.

"What I can't understand, miss—and now I *am* taking a liberty," he remarked, "is why on earth you have to find a man like Joe Herberd who's been married twenty years, fourteen of them to a wife like Emmy with bad legs——"

"Oh, it wasn't the *landlord*!" said Miss French. She gave way to considerable and, to the inspector, disconcerting mirth. "You've got a very nasty mind, inspector," she concluded. "I'd never seen dear old Joe before that night, I assure you; although I'd heard of him from Tim."

"Oh?—Well, that's what I was given to understand," said the inspector. "Would you care to

render me your gentleman's name and address, miss ? ”

“ So that you can first ask *me* what time I came and went, and then you can check up on me by asking *him*. I get it,” said Miss French with perfect good humour. “ Well, his name is Tim Downing, and he's a commercial traveller in whisky or linen or something for some reason I always connect with Ireland. He's not Irish, although he's got a blarneying tongue when he likes, and he's——”

“ What's he like to look at, miss ? ” asked the inspector. Nothing less than the inspiration of a lifetime had suddenly burst upon him. He saw his case squarely, he saw it whole, he saw it brought to a successful, plausible, dramatic and inevitable conclusion.

“ Well, he's like lots of people, I suppose,” began Miss French. “ He's not so very tall—in fact, he's only about a couple of inches taller than I am, and doesn't look that when we're apart. And he's one of the thin sort, and fairly dark, and more or less nondescript——”

“ Sounds like Mr. Waterbury,” said the inspector, with a grin, but cocking his eye to see how she would take it.

“ Good heavens, inspector ! Of course he isn't ! ” said Miss French, in great indignation. “ You can't imagine anything more different ! Besides, he's taller than Mr. Waterbury. *I'm* taller than Mr. Waterbury. You couldn't possibly mistake them ! ”

“ No, miss, I'm sure you couldn't,” said the

inspector soothingly. "And, now, miss, if you'll excuse the question, how comes it you and this Mr. Downing don't pair up and get married?"

"I don't want to," said Miss French roundly. "I don't say I don't want to be married, but I don't want to marry Tim. I wouldn't trust him, for one thing," she concluded.

"Then I suppose he and you fixed up to be at the *Rose and Thorn* together?" said the inspector.

"We did."

"Then it *was* you chose the *Rose and Thorn*, miss?" He spoke with considerable triumph.

"You thought Miss Smithers chose it, didn't you?" she said. "Well, she actually proposed it to the others, but, of course, I had already proposed it to her, and I knew she'd trot it out to show off in front of Mortimer and Plimmon."

"Bit of a psychologist, miss?"

"Well, what do you think teachers have to be?" she retorted.

"And you'll let me have Mr. Downing's permanent address, miss?"

"Well, I don't think he has one, really. His mother lives in Bucks, but I've never been there. But what's the odds, after all? If you want to get in touch with him right away, he's here in Low Abbotts, still staying at the *Rose and Thorn*. He thought he'd better when we heard about poor old Marion, and he thought I might be in trouble. He's quite a decent man. I met him at a half-a-crown dance on Armistice Night."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said the inspector. "Well—

well ! Still at the *Rose and Thorn* ! Well, I'm—
Well ! ”

“Try harder,” suggested the lady. “Words
don't really fail you. It's only what people
say.”

XVI

The Story Told by the Commercial Traveller



"YES, THAT'S ME," SAID MR. DOWNING. "NAME, Downing. Christian names Timothy Terence McCarthy. But I'm English through and through. It was my mother named me. She was Irish. I don't inherit it."

It was so obvious that he did that the inspector did not question the preposterous statement. He could see at once—or fancied that he could—why Miss French was in love with the man and also why she would not marry him. His wife, however, laughed about this when he told her, and made an unforgivable pun about 'Downing birds.'

"It's like this, Mr. Downing," said the inspector. "I've heard about you from Miss French, and I want a statement from you. Where were you, and what were you doing, between midnight and six in the morning last Monday week?"

Mr. Downing, tackled in the saloon bar of the *Rose and Thorn*, nodded to the barman to refill his glass, nodded towards the inspector, and then said to the barman:

"Business talk, Fred. Occupy yourself, my lad."

The barman grinned, and disappeared. "See

how I've got 'em trained!" said Mr. Downing, with great self-approbation. "He knows I'll shout for him if anybody comes in that I can't serve. When I get fired for taking too much commission," he added, with a wink, "I shall set up as a barman myself. A prettier puller of a beer-engine," he concluded enthusiastically, "than little T. T. McC. Downing I reckon it would be bloomin' hard to find. Yes, *sir*."

The inspector, disregarding these artistic leanings, lifted his glass, said *Cheerio* and took a deep drink. Then he said, offering cigarettes, and afterwards taking his pipe out: "And now, Mr. Downing, I'd be greatly obliged if you would kindly answer the question. I might mention that Miss French has spilt what I might call the gist of the beans, so it only remains with you, I should say, to confirm her."

"Bishop of London's job," replied Mr. Downing, pleased with his own ready wit. "But I get you, I get you, inspector," he added hastily, meeting Jervis's eye. "I went to my room—Number Eleven—at half-past eleven, and Miss French toddled in at just before twelve. She complained about a dripping tap, but that was the only bleat out of her. In the morning she woke me up to ask me what the time was, so I used my torch to look at my watch, and saw it was nearly half-past five. She thought it was time she was getting back, so at about a quarter to six she toddled off again, and very soon I went to sleep."

"At what time did you get up, Mr. Downing?" asked the inspector.

"Nine-ish. That is, I got up at sevenish, but heared something of what was going on, so crawled back again and lay low."

"Why?"

"Because Miss French appeared to be mixed up in the row, whatever it was, and I thought if I remained doggo it might keep the party cleaner, don't you know, and give her the chance to dig herself out if she'd got ditched."

"What did you think had happened?"

"Oh, nothing to what *did* happen, of course. I concluded that our little affair had blown a fuse, that's all. She'd several times impressed on me the necessity for keeping her job until her books had become a paying proposition. Not that they ever will. She definitely lacks the little something the real best-sellers have got. I told her so once. It was during our only real row."

"I see." The inspector wrote busily. Then he said, meeting his companion's eye :

"And how soon did you discover what had happened?"

"At breakfast. The whole place was full of it by then. The police had been brought in, the doctor had come, and every Jack and Jill in the hotel was shouting the odds like nobody's business."

"Did you have anything to say to Miss French that morning?"

"Yes. She shoved a note into my hand, asking my advice. I didn't like to write anything back, so I burnt her note by tearing it up and using it as spills to light my cigarettes—always a fire in the

commercial room, summer as well as winter—and I made sure it was completely destroyed in what seemed an unsuspecting way. Then I barged into her on purpose on the stairs, pretended I thought I'd hurt her and took her into the saloon bar for a drink. When I'd got rid of Fred—which isn't difficult, as no doubt you noticed just now—I put it to her straight that she should hand the police the plain straightforward dope."

"Which was?" asked the inspector.

"Told her to tell them where she'd spent the night, and I'd corroborate."

"Pity she didn't take your advice, Mr. Downing. It would have saved us one hell of a lot of trouble."

"You're telling *me*," agreed Mr. Downing, vaulting the bar counter and replenishing both the glasses. "But would she listen? 'You poor sap!' I said. 'Nobody's going to hang you for spending the night in my bed, but you may find yourself in Number One Queer Street, my girl, if you try to make out you were in that room while that woman was being corpsed. She argued she'd had some drinks and the police would think she'd slept through everything. Well, I argued, too, but I couldn't move her. Mind you, I'd no idea then she thought her brother might have done it.'"

"What!" said the inspector. "Did she know that very same night that young French was here with his motor-bike, then?"

"She must have seen him, because as soon as she got into bed she said: 'Tim, I've seen Malcolm in the street.'"

"Oh, I see. She hadn't spoken to him, then?"

"Evidently not. And she didn't think he'd seen her, although apparently she'd kind of thought he'd come down, but wouldn't give me any reason for thinking so. Anyway, I didn't waste time over him!"

"No," said the inspector. "Look here, Mr. Downing, when did she come across to you with this idea her brother might have done it?"

"She didn't, Super."

"Inspector."

"Sorry. Never mind; you're due for promotion, I should say. No, I jerked it out of her when she was feeling a bit below par one day just before you juggled her. By the way, you might let the wench out on bail. Hasn't even been brought before the magistrates yet, you know. I mean, habeas corpus and so forth. Or haven't you heard about that?"

"Don't worry about Miss French," said the inspector. He gave the young man a sharp glance, and made his mind up about him. He did not like him, but he thought he could depend on him to keep his mouth shut. After all, it was 'not too bad of him'—high praise in the vocabulary of the inspector—to have stayed on like this because the girl was in trouble. Plenty of so-called better men would have hopped it and left her to take whatever was coming to her. It was adroit, too, as the inspector could not help but acknowledge, the way in which the young man had kept himself hidden away at the *Rose and Thorn* without appearing to avoid outside contacts.

"No," he said, "I shouldn't worry about her.

She doesn't know it—she's a very self-willed and impulsive young lady, as you know—but we are keeping a grip on her purely for her own good. While we hold *her*, the real murderer probably thinks he's safe."

"He won't be such a mutt as to think anything of the sort until she's been before the magistrates and it's clear that she'll be committed for trial," said Mr. Downing.

"To have arrested her is enough for the bird I have in view," said the inspector. "I'm obliged, Mr. Downing, for your information. I hope you won't need to repeat it in court, and I don't think it's likely you will."

"Well, I'm glad it was Ursula who spilt the beans, and not me," replied Mr. Downing, gazing into the depths of his glass and then calling authoritatively for Fred. "You can come back now, Fred," he bellowed. "We've both had the same again, and now we'll have another."

"Not for me," said the inspector, paying for the second round they had had. "Thanking you," he added courteously. Mr. Downing waved a farewell, and, swinging himself round towards the counter, bent his mind to serious business.

"Now who?" said the inspector, taking the road up the hill. "Now who? And for how much, I wonder?"

The hill, crouched on its haunches, could not enlighten him. He shook his head, and reflected that it would be a Scotland Yard job after all.

"I don't see it," said the chief constable, to whom he confided this view. "You've done so well, my

dear fellow, that I'll tackle them at Marlborough Street myself. Fellow there with a genius for faces. Arrest your murderer ! Arrest him, my dear chap. . . . We can always let him go again if we're wrong ! ”

XVII

The Story Told by the Gentleman with the Cough



THE OLD MAN CACKLED AND THEN COUGHED. HE shook so distressingly that the inspector became perturbed and wondered whether a pat on the back or a drink of water would be the better remedy. He wished his wife could have been there to advise him.

The paroxysm ended shortly, however, and the old gentleman seemed little the worse. Except for a very red nose and watering eyes, in fact, there was no change in him whatsoever.

He wheezily apologised for keeping the inspector waiting.

"Warning there for you, my boy," he said. "Same as I say to all young fellows starting out in life. Leave the drink alone. If I'd left the drink alone," he continued, laying a semi-palsied paw upon the inspector's sleeve, "I'd have been dead of misery twenty years ago, but I'd have died with a clear conscience, clean lungs, no chest complaints, and gone straight to hell. So perhaps it's all for the best, young fellow, hey?"

"What I want to know, sir," said the inspector, "is about that dripping tap."

"Can't remember a thing about it, upon my word I can't," responded the ancient. "But I can tell you all about the murder. You know, young fellow, I've been living here for several years now, but I don't remember a night I ever enjoyed more. This chest of mine, you see, this happy drinker's chest—did you read Sir John Squire's book, young fellow? Did you? 'Out, the damned teetotaler!' Oh, glory, how I did laugh! Cricket's a wonderful game."

He wheezed, choked, streamed and hiccupped again.

"Yes, sir?" said the inspector patiently. "You spent a happy time on the night of the murder?"

"Ah, didn't I just!" said the permanent. "First there were the young ladies. Now I'm not like some of my age, I'm not a curmudgeon, young fellow. No. When I see ladies I like them to be free, easy, chatty—do you know, that used to mean fleas in my youth, I declare it did!—and able to give a good account of themselves"—he winked with the mirth of a Priapus—"either in love or war. There was one of 'em—a red-haired girl, very lovely—she reminded me of my sweetheart, she did indeed . . ."

"Bear up, sir," said the inspector, forestalling another attack of wheezing, coughing and laughter. "I expect you mean Miss French. I've arrested her for the murder."

"For the murder?" This time there was no coping with the old gentleman's amusement. "Oh, no, no, no! You can't do that, young man. Why don't you fellows wear uniform? Deceiving the

general public ! That's what you're doing, you know."

"I'm off duty, sir, for the moment," said the inspector diplomatically.

"Arrested her ? Oh, you're quite wrong there. Quite wrong ! Oh, quite, quite, quite, quite wrong !"

"Indeed, sir ?"

"Oh, yes. But I mustn't tell tales out of school, I suppose, about ladies."

"I'd rather we didn't have to hang her, sir," said the inspector. The old gentleman stared at him and made peculiar gobbling noises. These made him cough, so he desisted, wrestled with the cough, and then said slowly :

"But, my dear boy, she wasn't in the room at all ! She was Venus, boy, naked as Venus !"

He began to dribble slightly at the corners of his weak old mouth. The inspector waited.

"She wasn't herself, you know," the old man continued. "Not herself at all. Or else I wasn't myself ! Which do you think it could be ?" He began to chuckle again, and still the inspector waited.

"Come that Monday afternoon," the ancient man continued, his eyes lighting up with the pleasures of reminiscence. "'Why don't you go down to the station, Mr. Odds ?' says Emmy Herberd to me, 'and have a look at the Holiday Children come in ?'"

"So she helps me on with my overcoat, and finds my best walking stick for me, and wraps me up in my scarf, and off I go.

“ ‘It’s all downhill to the bus stop,’ she says to me at parting, ‘and coming back you can get a lift in a car.’ Very good they are in these parts. You always find that where there’s hills.”

The inspector assented to this, put his note-book down (since it seemed that the old man would take some time to come to the climax of his story) and composed his mind to listen carefully, in case some point should arise which bore upon the murder.

“It was pleasant ; I like to be out ; not like some of my age that can’t even bother to get out of bed and into their clothes,” Mr. Odds went on, smiling gently. “With this cough of mine you wouldn’t think I’d got the energy, but I have. Well, I took it slowly down the hill.

“ ‘You’ll have plenty of time. The bus don’t go until the half-hour,’ says Emmy Herberd. Very good she is to me, through having bad legs herself. You find that too, you know, very often, young fellow.”

The inspector again agreed, as agreement seemed to be called for.

“I had to wait for the bus, even then,” went on the old man. He coughed for the first time since he had begun this part of his narrative. The inspector, a psychologist in his own way, thought that perhaps the cough was partly a by-product of boredom. Mr. Odds remembered that it had bored him to wait about for the bus, and his next words showed it.

“I do hate waiting and mucking about,” he complained. “But it came to time, and Jeremiah Finch driving, and we passed the time of day, and

Joe Bailey—he was the conductor—helped me up the steps, and we talked a bit about the Holiday Children, poor creatures, and he promised me they'd run me right up to the station so I needn't get out at the Turn, and so they did.

"At the station there was a mort of people waiting. New Abbots is a right bigger place than this, and plenty there don't seem to have much to do. Still, it was mostly women and children, I must say, and they were on the footbridge over the line, up and down both sides on the steps, up to the station barrier, in the booking hall, and everywhere else they could get.

"There were seven or eight motor-cars all lined up by the kerb, and a whole troop of these Boy Scouts about, and some with their trek cart to take on some of the bundles the Holiday Children brought with them, and Tom Jenkins and Sid King, the porters, and Billy Wakefield, the station-master, hanging about and showing off. You'd have thought the King was coming instead of a lot of poor little rapscaillon children from London."

"Rapscaillon is right," said the inspector, reviewing in his mind the various complaints the police had received from irritated farmers and shepherds.

The old man nodded, chuckled, coughed a bit, and then said :

"What do they expect, bringing the poor creatures down here? Children should be by the sea. There's things for them to do there all day long, without getting into any mischief. There's too many things in this country get done on the cheap, and charity is apt to be one of them. But don't interrupt me,

young fellow, or else we shall never get done. What am I telling you this for anyway ? ”

“ You’re helping me to find the murderer, Mr. Odds.”

“ Oh, ah, that’s it, so I am. But it’s no use beginning in the middle. If I did that you’d get no satisfaction. Start at the beginning, and you always know where you are. And that goes for telling lies, too,” he added, wheezing happily, and wagging his ancient head. “ You don’t want to do any fancy lying, young fellow. Just begin at the beginning, and go on.”

The inspector, after the recent rebuke, thought it best just to nod. He did this, and opened his note-book.

“ In came the train,” said Mr. Odds, “ and out got these children and a lot of Girl Scouts. I never knew they had such things. We ought to have them here. Do a mort of good and you could always get organised labour for the hayfields, instead of the way they go on. But never mind about that. We ain’t here to talk about haymaking, although, mind you, when I was a young man and lived in the south of England—— Well, never mind that, either ! ” He chuckled and wheezed again, his old face wicked with remembered and joyous sin.

“ And the children ? ” said the inspector.

“ Oh, ah, well, that didn’t matter. It was young James married one girl and—— Oh, you mean these children ? The Holiday Children ! Ah, well, they got out of the train, and formed up behind the others, and some young women got out, too, and talked to ’em Army fashion and got ’em in

line, and then the Girl Scouts came out first with an old pussy all dressed up, and t'others followed.

"The motor-cars soon filled up, and the Boy Scouts took the Girl Scouts' kit-bags and soon had the trek cart loaded, because the other poor creatures wouldn't be parted from their baggage.

"Well, I'd been having a grandstand look at it all, because I'd stopped on the step of the bus, and could see over other people's heads, but I had to get down when the bus had to start getting back, unless I went back on it. I didn't want to go back, not yet awhile. I did dearly wish to know what they did with the Holiday Children and how they got them sorted out and put round to the houses ; so being that I saw young Jonathan Wright, with his butcher's cart, on t'other side of the street I walked over to him and asked him where he thought these children were going.

" 'Hop in, grandpa, and let's find out,' he says. Different from folk in real big towns, that never spare a minute for anything.

"Well, he gets down, and him and Josh Turner from the ironmonger's, they hoist and heave, and I give a good pull up with my arms, and get my knee on the top, and up I go and set there beside young Jonathan, and up comes the cob and away we rattle, keeping the middle of the road and holding up one of these car-loads of children behind us, with the young woman driving hooting her horn for all she's worth, so we know we're on the right track"—he wheezed again with laughter—"until she don't hoot any more, and at that I turn my head and see the car going down a side street.

"I tell Jonathan, and he pulls up and says he knows the place, then. So him and Willie Smart from Jessups' the corn-chandlers, they let me down gently, and I take the turning the car goes down and sure enough these cars are all drawing up and turning round—very occard it was, too, because the only place to turn easy was up the coaching yard of the *Wagon and Horses*, and Billy Bond had got his brewers' dray in that.

"Well, I have a lot of fun watching these young women turning their cars, and then I see that all the Holiday Children are being led into Saint Cuthbert's Church Hall. So I go up to the door and have a peep, and there's all these children and the Girl Scouts sitting in rows on the Sunday School benches and one poor little creature in the second row crying, and hadn't got a handkerchief, so in I went and wiped her little eyes, and gave her my handkerchief to blow her little nose, and up comes the Reverend Rearden and says :

" 'So you're here, be you, you old sinner?' he says. I like that boy. He may be only a curate now, but he'll make a fine bishop one day. 'Then come on,' he says, 'and help me quiet these brats.'

"The hall was pretty full, and there was a great long tea-table one side—three or four trestle tables all put together—and the Sunday School Treat urns at both ends, and great plates of bread and butter, and buns, and fish-paste sandwiches—which I do dearly love !—and cut cake and little cakes made by the Church ladies like we have at the Church bazaars, and by and by the children cheered up and began to

look at the tea-table. Well, at the back of the hall were the young women and the old pussy that had brought the children on the train, and they were sitting about, looking tired, poor creatures, and no wonder, and asking each other what to do next.

"Well, the Reverend Rearden is having his work cut out, because his job seems to be to get these children to the tea-table half at a time because there wasn't room for all; and what with giving his orders above all the noise of children crying and children hollering to other children, and the Church ladies all talking away to each other behind the tea urns, and the Boy Scouts trying to sort out and give back all the kit-bags they'd collected off the Girl Scouts, and young Sam Todd hammering nails to finish looping up the gymnasium ropes out of the way—well, if he was truly religious he must have thought he was in Bedlam—no, not Bedlam; what's that other place?—Babel—and he must have got clergyman's sore throat that day if he'd never had it before.

"Well, that wasn't all. Because, you see, the women that had offered to take the children wanted to have their pick, so all of 'em swarmed 'emselves in and was bidding for those poor creatures like Uncle Tom's Cabin, without mention of the cattle-market on Wednesdays. Well, some of these children were snatched up before they'd had their tea, and that had to be looked to, because there was such a howling set-up that even the Reverend Rearden couldn't hear himself speak. Well, he got these Church ladies in order somehow, all but Carrie

Stubbington and Maria Hobbs. They stood over the one child—a nice little clean-looking thing with china-blue eyes and tidy curls, and hands that went this way and that among the eatables until you wouldn't have thought that little round stum-jack could keep down all that went in it, and there they stuck, in spite of all that the Reverend could say, till I went up to Maria Hobbs, who is a near woman and watches every farthing, and pointed out quietly in her ear that the child looks like costing a mort more money than the five shillings which is all she will get from the Charity.

“So she sees reason, and goes away quiet, and the Reverend finds me a chair right opposite the fish-paste sandwiches, and Maria, who's seen a child that eats next to nothing and says it's never hardly hungry, and has written her name clearly with my pencil on the label round the child's neck, brings me a nice cup of tea, with plenty of milk, as I like it, and a drop of water added, not to have it too strong, and there I am, joking with the children, who all begin calling me Father Christmas and Mr. Beaver, and we all get on a treat.

“Then someone remembers these helpers, who are all just hanging about, poor creatures, wondering what to do, except the old pussy, who has gone out, we are told, to a tea-shop because she can't stand tea out of urns. That leaves four—a young lass who can't be above twenty; one poor creature who's carrying—that's the one that got murdered, young fellow, and no wonder, for when I took a peep in Joe Herberd's book, *Miss* she'd put herself down as ! Well, then there was a poor soul that's got the jerks

and doesn't look right in the head; and a fine brave lass with red hair, looks worth a dozen of the rest of 'em put together. I took a real interest in her.

"So they're set down to have a cup of tea, but nobody bothers too much about 'em, and after a bit all these children that the women had fixed up to take, are shouted for by the Reverend Rearden, and taken along to be billeted, or, some said, to see the doctor first.

"Well, of course, by this time, as you might say, my time was up. I knew Emmy Herberd would soon start worrying if I didn't turn up to my tea—takes care of me like a daughter; better than a good many daughters would, I might tell you. Never put upon your own kith and kin, young fellow. It never pays in the end. Save up your bit of money, whatever you can come by fairly honest, let 'em all know that you've bought an annuity with it, and then choose yourself a nice little home from home—a pub is better than lodgings—and make yourself really comfortable. Have what you like, and have it when you like it, and pay for it prompt and cheerful. That's the way to spend a good old age." He smiled serenely, coughed a little, and leaned forward rather pathetically, peering at the inspector.

"Let me see—what am I telling you about?" he asked, with the bewildered expression of the aged when they have lost the thread of an immediate interest.

"The red-haired girl. You'd just made up your mind to go back to the *Rose and Thorn*, Mr. Odds, I think."

"Ah, that's it, that's it. I go wandering off and then I forget, young fellow."

"If you're too tired, I could come again later on and hear the rest," the inspector suggested. But the old man would not hear of it.

"A tale's like a pancake, young fellow. It's a mistake to put a part by ; it's never the same the next time. No, no ! Now I recollect what I was telling you. Yes, I went outside and got the bus—only just caught it, too—Jeff Brenner waited when he saw me—and by half-past six I was snug in the commercial room of the *Rose and Thorn* here, eating toast and shrimp paste and having my nice cup of tea. Very cosy indeed it was, too, and afterwards, when Dorrie had cleared away and made me comfortable in an arm-chair by the fire, a young fellow comes in, a commercial, and says how am I, and how would I like to try his samples.

"Well, I've tried all sorts of samples from those fellows. They know I shan't buy, and anyway they only take wholesale orders, you know, but this young fellow's speciality was whisky. Now I'm not allowed whisky as a rule, and I mentioned to him this cough of mine, and he says I shan't hardly know I'm drinking whisky. 'You'll think it's milk, except it'll do you a sight more good,' he says. So we had a little tot each, and he was right ! Young fellow, that was the most beautiful Irish whisky I'd ever tasted in my life, and I wish I had some here to give you."

The inspector, accepting the hint, got up and rang the bell. The ancient chuckled wheezily.

"Joe Herberd's whisky won't touch it," he said, "so don't you go trying me on that."

"No, no, Mr. Odds. We'll see whether this young fellow has got any more. That is, if he's the young fellow I was talking to myself not too long ago. Is his name Downing, do you know?"

"His name's Tim; that's all I know," said Mr. Odds.

"Same bloke. Oh, Dorrie," the inspector continued, "is Mr. Downing in the house?"

"I'll see, sir." He was, and soon appeared.

"Have you got any more of those samples of yours, young fellow?" said Mr. Odds, before the inspector could speak.

"I might find half a one," replied the young man, winking at the inspector.

"Send it in by Dorrie," suggested Jervis. "And now, Mr. Odds, we come to what I'm particularly interested in," he added, as soon as Mr. Downing, with a politely waved hand, was gone. Mr. Odds chuckled again.

"I take an interest in all that goes on in this house," he volunteered, "and after the young fellow had gone I sat on in the commercial room listening to the wireless part of the time, and listening to all the noises and figuring out what they were, the rest of the time, till Dorrie comes busting in and starts to be laying a cloth.

"What's that for, Dorrie?" I says. 'I don't have my supper in here.'"

"I know as you don't, Mr. Odds," she answers me. 'But we've got some people come in sudden, and the missus says they'll have to have something

in here, and she told me to ask you special whether you'd mind getting out of here, as she didn't think you'd care for the company.'

"Well, young fellow, I've a great regard for Emmy, and we always meet each other half-way, and I knew if she wanted me out of the way there was reason for it, so I got up and went along to the little parlour where I generally sit, and there was Emmy herself a-making the fire up.

"Ah, there you are, grandpa,' she says; she calls me that when I've done something special to please her or save her some trouble. 'Now you set right down here,' she says, 'and I'll send up Fred with a nice glass of beer and a piece of fried fish for your supper. They're frying up Saturday's fish across the road, but it's lovely and fresh,' she says, 'or I wouldn't suggest you should have it.'

"Well, fresh or not, it wouldn't matter, young fellow. My stomach will take nourishment out of anything, fresh or stale. But she was quite right about the fried fish. We hadn't had any hot weather, and that was all fresh in to Barty Mullins on Saturday morning because I watched 'em unload it in the boxes, and got a bit of ice to suck, from Barty, which does my old gums a bit of good—or so I always reckon.

"Well, I had the bit of fish and some chips, too and all, with it, and I had the glass of beer, and then I thought to myself I'd go to bed, so I calls Fred, who always goes up with me to make sure I don't slip on these brass treads—and up we go. But after I got into bed there was such a singing and shouting hullabaloo downstairs I wanted to know

all about it, so I leaned up and listened, and then I got up and put my dressing-gown on—I've got a very nice dressing-gown—red silk and all facings and padding. My married daughter gave it me for Christmas when they thought I should have the pneumonia, but I didn't."

He chuckled again and gazed raptly into the past.

"And did you go downstairs again, Mr. Odds?" enquired the inspector.

"Eh?" The old man came jerking back to the present. "Eh? Oh, yes. Down the stairs I went and could hear all of their voices—the women, I mean—and the chaps all singing in the bar, so I guessed perhaps Tim—that young chap that was in here just now, and—Hullo, that reminds me. Do you think he forgot about that half sample?"

"No. Here it comes," said the inspector. Dorrie entered with the drink on a tray. There were two glasses.

"Try it, Dorrie," said Mr. Odds, holding out his glass to the girl.

"Ugh! The nasty stuff!" said Dorrie, delighted at the invitation. The ancient drank his portion at one draught, wiped his mouth and smacked his lips and observed that that was the stuff.

"Why, you never even coughed, Mr. Odds!" said Dorrie admiringly.

"Spoil the taste if I did. Besides, a good whisky don't do it," said the old man, laughing. "But the things I could drink when I was young!"

At this thought, nostalgia overcame him, and he coughed, the inspector noticed, for nearly a minute and a half. The inspector finished his whisky and

handed back the glass. Dorrie went out and closed the door behind her.

"You heard the men singing in the bars and you thought perhaps——"

"That young Tim was standing treat, of course, which is just what he was doing, for I went down all these stairs and peeped round the door to see."

"And why was he standing treat? Was it his birthday or something?"

"No, it was not his birthday, nor yet his wedding night, but I found out afterwards it must have been something between the two he might have been celebrating."

"Ah," said the inspector, believing that they were approaching the point of the lengthy story. He was anticipating, however. The ancient had more to say.

"I reckon he was celebrating Venus," said Mr. Odds impressively.

"Ah, yes," said the inspector, too intelligent and too sympathetic to make manifest his disappointment. "You mentioned Venus before. That would be Miss French, without a doubt."

"I don't name names, and I don't give a woman away," said Mr. Odds. "I know my book of rules—the rules we always kept to when I was a young fellow," he added, with a touch of adverse criticism.

"Quite so, Mr. Odds," agreed the inspector, "but I am investigating a case of murder and—I don't want to hang the wrong person."

"No, of course not," said Mr. Odds, "and in

that case, young fellow, perhaps a woman's name is not so sacred."

"I ought to have details. Go back to when you got up out of bed."

"Yes." Mr. Odds began to cough distressingly. "Yes," he said, looking, suddenly, pathetically aged. "That's right. When I got up out of bed I thought to go downstairs and see what young Tim were up to, and that's what I did. One peep round the door, that were all."

"But you'd only met that day for the first time?"

"That's right. Only that day; but what with the little talk we had, and then that beautiful whisky I seemed to have known him longer."

The inspector, who could sympathise with this point of view, nodded.

"But just as I got to the head of the stairs, going down," the old man continued, "I heard someone coming along up, so I moved aside, not to try and pass them."

"Unlucky to pass people on the stairs?" the inspector suggested.

"Too dangerous, in *this* house," Mr. Odds replied. "These old brass treads! I weren't going to slip up on them, if I could help it."

"And who came up?"

"One of these women—the head-wagging one—had an electric torch, and shone it straight in front of her."

"Did she see you?"

"No, she never saw me. I kept to myself, by the banisters up on the landing, and she passed straight on, and turned into Number Four."

"That's a double room, isn't it?"

"Oh, ah, it's a double room, but not what you mean, young fellow," said the ancient satyr with a chuckle. The inspector accepted this interpretation of his words without a protest, and the old man went on cheerfully :

"She went into Number Four, and then, in a minute or less—I hadn't yet ventured myself for to feel for the top step with my foot—out she comes again, and along to the bathroom and that, and by the time I got to the landing—that's on the first floor, you know, where the commercial room and the little parlour is—back she comes again, and I heard her go into Number Four and shut the door again. Then she unshuts it, so I know she's thought of the other young woman to share the room with her.

"Well, by the time I was moving along the landing, having had my peep at the saloon, that being on the ground floor of the house, as you do know, I saw the door of the commercial room open, and out comes the old pussy. *She* has a candle, not a torch. Brought it down out of the bedroom with her, I should judge. She takes no notice of me, nor me of her, and mounts up the stairs and goes along the landing.

"Well, when the commercial door opened, it seemed to me they were having as much fun in there as ever young Tim was having in the saloon. So I felt out of it, young fellow, out of it. You can't be a man of my age and not feel out of it sometimes. So I waited a bit, and then it seemed to me I'd be just as well off in bed, and up I mount again, very slow and sure, because of these brass treads, and

making no noise, I shouldn't wonder, because I've got my slippers on. I'll admit they squeaked when they were new, and that was five Christmases ago, but very good slippers they've been to me and hardly worn out at all. Anyway, I wasn't making a sound.

"Well, all of a sudden, as you might say, I heard a sort of a squealing noise, and somebody knocking on somebody else's door, so when I got to the top of the steps I listened.

"It must have been the old pussy, for she come some way from somewhere else and was knocking at the door of Number Four. 'Oh, Miss Plimmer'—or some such name—she says. 'Oh, Miss Plimmer, I believe there's a man in my room.'

"Well, I don't know how ladies should reckon to go on in such a case as that, young fellow, and I didn't want to come to grips with anyone, so, thinks I, I will go below and fetch Joe Herberd out of the commercial where he was making very merry with these young women, and get him to throw this man out."

"Just a minute, Mr. Odds," said the inspector. "What made you think that there *was* a man in that lady's room? Didn't you suppose it was moonshine? You know, ladies—especially ladies no longer young—often take these little fancies. Why did you take it seriously?"

"Because I'd heard him go along," said Mr. Odds, with a senile chuckle, "while I was lying in my bed, and I didn't recognise the footsteps."

"But you wouldn't recognise the footsteps unless it was somebody you were used to, would you? What about all the commercial travellers who

used to stay at the *Rose and Thorn* at different times ? ”

“ There was only one in the house that night, a young fellow named Cave,” said the ancient, “ apart from the young fellow Tim, and a miserable sort of a fellow Cave was, to be sure. Complained about a dripping tap, and had a washer put on it, so I can’t get my sleep for keep listening for it and not hearing it in the night.”

“ But this stranger might have come in later on, and you missed seeing him,” the inspector pointed out. “ Or it may have been Mr. Cave. You couldn’t be sure.”

“ I’m as sure as sure it were nobody *I’d* ever heard before,” said Mr. Odds. But as he could produce no proof of this statement, the inspector did not accept it as the truth.

“ What happened next ? ” he demanded.

“ Well, first thing that happened was a holus bolus between old pussy and Dotty Annie,” said Mr. Odds, gleefully. “ Oh, they did go for one another, although very low-voiced and polite. And the upshot of *that* was that the dotty one refused to go anywhere near the other one’s room to see if the man was there, and stuck to it they should ring the bell and ask for the landlord.

“ Well, it seemed a pity, after all, to disturb Joe Herberd’s fun, and, as I’d heard the fellow go while I stood listening to these women, I up and spoke from the head of the stairs and said :

“ Could I help you ladies at all ? ”

“ Well, I don’t know why they accepted—at least, I didn’t then, although I found out later—but,

anyway, the two of us, me and the old pussy—Screw-loose still wouldn't budge—went along to her room and searched the wardrobe and looked in the washstand cupboard and under the bed and even in the chest of drawers and behind the window curtains, but, of course, there was no one to be found."

"Why didn't Miss Mortimer want to call up the landlord, Mr. Odds?"

"Because of the fun Joe was having down in the commercial with the Venus and the other two young women. She didn't trust him to behave himself when he got inside her bedroom."

He chuckled with tremendous amusement.

"Well, that's all very interesting, Mr. Odds, and I'm very much obliged," said the inspector, closing his note-book, putting it away and getting up. There was nothing fresh the old man could tell him, he surmised. The case against Miss French had broken down.

"Hey, set you down again, young fellow," said Mr. Odds severely. "You haven't heard the best of it yet."

"I've heard what concerns my case," said the inspector.

"No, no, young fellow. You're missing the cream of it. You mustn't miss the cream of it. Set down."

He was so insistent that the inspector, cursing himself for a week-minded sentimentalist, sat down.

"That book of yours, young fellow," said the implacable oracle, austere. The inspector produced it and licked the tip of his pencil.

"I went back to my bed," continued Mr. Odds, coughing dismally, "and the old pussy shut her door. These lads in the saloon stopped singing, but I couldn't get off to sleep for all the laughing and that in the commercial, which was pretty nearly underneath my floor. But at last even Joe and these young women gave up, and I could hear the young women getting themselves up the stairs."

"Tiddly, Mr. Odds?" enquired the inspector, almost after the manner of David Copperfield.

"They were having trouble with the youngest young woman," said Mr. Odds, in answer, the inspector inferred, to the question. "Good thing for them it was only up one flight of stairs. Slipped two or three times on that brasswork, they did, and small wonder, and one of 'em says: 'Hold up, there, Hilda'—or some such name—don't matter—'hold up, there,' she says. 'You must learn to hold your drinks a lot better than this, my gal.'"

"Then the youngest one, she ups and groans something terrible, and says: 'Let me go by myself. I think I'm dying,' she says. And at that the first young woman laughs, and the second one says: 'Look out, French! She's going to be sick.'"

"Well, I'd got out of bed, and was at my door, to see the fun, and give a hand if I could, and someone had lit the gas on the landing and turned it down low, but you could see.

"Just then, poor old Polly with the jerks puts her head out, gives a kind of a squeak, and puts it back again. Well, they got her along to where she could sick up if she had to—and from the sounds she did. When they come out again the red-head—that glim

of gas glinted very pretty on her hair as she passed along by it, going to the bedroom that Polly had just popped out of—she says : ‘ This is merry-come-up. Drat the brat,’ she says. ‘ I suppose we’d better put her to bed.’

“ What was the time ? ” enquired the inspector.

“ The grandfather—him they call *my* clock—chimed eleven, but he’s always ten minutes fast.”

The inspector made a slight tick against some words upon one of his completed pages, wrote initials against it, and then looked up again.

“ You’re sure you’re not tired, Mr. Odds ? ”

“ No, no. Now don’t you be so impatient, young fellow. You asked for my story, and that’s what you’re going to get,” said the old fellow, nodding his head. “ Well, as I was saying, the youngest young woman she says she feels all right now, and to go back and finish their fun. ‘ I’m sorry, French,’ she says, ‘ but I haven’t felt well all day. I was bilious this morning. It isn’t the drinks,’ she says.

“ ‘ All right, Hilda,’ says the young woman carrying. ‘ Don’t you worry,’ she says. ‘ You go bye-bye and you’ll feel quite different in the morning.’

“ So with that they knock on Polly’s door, and she comes and opens it just a crack, and says : ‘ I can’t have her sleeping in here in that state.’ But Venus Red-head, she’s not having any of that. She shoves her foot in, saucy as a gippo, and says : ‘ Now, none of that. You open the door and let her get to bed.’ So they put her inside and go off down the stairs, and when they get to the top, the Venus,

she calls out: 'Good night, whoever you are, snooping up top there.'

" 'Good night, my dear,' I said. And she laughs, and down they both go. I didn't know I'd been seen, but there! A man's a man to her sort, and no disrespect intended, either, at that."

"Then you went back to bed, Mr. Odds?"

"I did, and very snug it seemed after standing about on the landing all that time. But I don't sleep much, you know. My cough troubles me when I get lying down, and I coughed a goodish bit, I remember."

"Chilly, I expect, from the landing," said the inspector.

"I daresay. Anyway, there was a lot more noise from the commercial, and then up comes the other young woman, the one that's carrying, and I could hear her opening the door with her key and going in. I always leave my door on the jar, you see, because I like to be able to get out quick if the house should catch on fire."

"And so that you can pop your head out without making any noise if there's any occasion for snooping," thought he inspector; but all he said aloud was:

"Ycs, I see."

"So did I," said the old man, chuckling. "So did I! And I wonder I've got any eyesight left," he added hoarsely, overcome by the memory.

"Talk about Lady Godiva and Pceping Tom! But that isn't next, young fellow. Don't you go hurrying me on."

It was obvious that he was getting very tired.

There couldn't, in any case, be much more, thought the inspector, and yet he had begun to wonder whether the old man had actually seen the murder done. His inordinate sense of curiosity might make anything possible.

"The next thing was young Tim coming up to bed. I knew, because he'd got the room next to mine, and he put his head in when I called out good night, and said good night to me, and then went next door, humming under his breath like a young chap that's pleased with himself and thinks to be better pleased still.

"Soon after that the red-head comes upstairs. I knew her because she had on shoes that tap-tapped along the landing, like I'd heard 'em before. *She* went into her room—at least, I take it she did, though I never heard her close the door.

"Then there was nothing for best part of half an hour. Grandfather struck for midnight, and before that Joe and Emmy had come up and gone on up to the floor above, and it was so quiet that all I could hear was my tap a-drip-drip-dripping from a room two doors away. They hadn't put the washer on then.

"I must have dozed off, but only for a minute, because my cough woke me up, and I would have coughed the place down, only, before I began, I thought I heard somebody moving along the landing. I held the cough back, and swallowed, and thought I should choke—and I very near did, young fellow!—but I put a lozenge in my mouth and wiped my eyes on the sheet, and tried to hold my breath, and I got the better of that cough!

"Well, I wondered who might be wandering about, and thinking it might be the youngest young woman took bad again, and maybe needing some help"—he winked diabolically at the inspector—"I got out of bed again, went to the door and had a look. The gas was out on the landing, and at first I couldn't make out nobody. Then whoever it was took and flashed a torch to see the number on my door. Of course, it was young Tim's number she was looking for, and when she came there she gives just the faintest little flick of a tap and out he popped and took the torch, and said: 'Put that damn thing out, you cuckoo.' But before he could switch it off I saw her, Venus, just as she went in the door. . . . I heard her go back, too. I'm always awake by half-past four."

"Did she go back at half-past four?"

"No. She wanted to. He wouldn't let her go till about an hour later. She argued, but he soon stopped that. Young Tim, I mean. Small blame to him." The chuckle this time ended in such a burst of coughing that the inspector was alarmed. He was about to go to the door and call out for help when the old man recovered. With his eyes streaming he gasped out:

"Come on back, young fellow. I'm all right. Never was better in my life."

"Glad to hear that, Mr. Odds," said the inspector, meaning it. "And I'm much obliged for the story. But are you sure she didn't go back to her room between midnight and half-past five?"

"If she did, young Tim's not the fellow I take him for," said the old man with the most lascivious leer

the inspector had ever seen on a human countenance. "No, no! He wouldn't let her go."

"But the murder took place between midnight and six o'clock, Mr. Odds. Your evidence doesn't let her out, even then."

The old man looked at him, his slobbering mouth working pitifully.

"Venus didn't murder that poor young woman," he said. "She couldn't have done, young fellow."

"But I haven't any proof she didn't," said the inspector. The old man looked at him cunningly.

"Isn't my word proof?" he asked.

"Well, Mr. Odds, I'm really afraid it isn't. You see——"

The ancient wagged his anger. His face was set in stern and yet anxious lines.

"Now just a minute. Just a minute, young fellow. You answer me this. Could she have murdered that other young woman without being in the bedroom with her? Could she? Now just you answer me that!"

"No, of course she couldn't. But don't you see, Mr. Odds——"

"You'll see in a minute, young fellow, if you keep a still tongue in your head. I wasn't going to tell you ought about this next bit, but it seems I'll have to forget my upbringing for once.

"When that young woman comes out I pops out on her, dressing-gown in my hand, and says: 'Put this on, my dear, and give me a kiss.'

"Well, she never turned a hair. She called me a wicked old man, and hugged the dressing-gown round her, and said I'd lose her her reputation, and

there we stood and chatted very soft, and she kissed me again before she went back to her room, and old grandfather, ten minutes fast, struck six as we stood there, and frightened her off like Cinderella at the ball. Ah, and she dropped off my dressing-gown before she skipped away."

XVIII

The Story Told by the Murderer

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(I)

"WELL, NOW, MR. FRENCH," SAID THE CHIEF CONSTABLE. He, the inspector, the dead woman's husband and the red-haired young man in motor-cyclist's leggings and leather coat, were at the chief constable's house. The stolid sergeant sat uncomfortably on the hard chair near the door, Mr. Waterbury, on a similar chair, sat beside him, and the inspector was standing with his back to the french windows, of malice aforethought, this, because he wanted to be sure that the chief constable was going to keep his mind on the matter in hand and not on roses, snails and the rest of the flora and fauna of the garden. The chief constable himself was seated on a chair at the table, across which the young man, who looked pale and appeared to lack all his sister's characteristics except for his extraordinary physical resemblance to her, faced him with a slight, anxious, stretched, uncomfortable smile.

"Yes, sir?" he answered, nervously.

"Your movements, Mr. French, on the day and night of the crime, have interested us, but we are not yet perfectly clear about them."

"No, sir," said Mr. French, slightly licking his lips.

"Now, whose baby was it?" said the chief constable, suddenly. "Eh? Come on, now! Whose?"

The sergeant laid a large hand on Mr. Waterbury's knee as the little man stiffened and seemed about to get up. The red-haired young man glanced across in their direction before he answered:

"Yes, sir, it was mine. At least, she said so, and I thought it was likely."

"Oh, you did," said the chief constable, at a loss. He looked at the inspector, a married man, for assistance.

"You've given us a lot of trouble, Mr. French," said the inspector sourly. "Didn't it occur to you that you might be landing your sister in serious trouble by coming round these parts with a motor-bike and side-car, and changing the number plates, and chucking the side-car down that quarry?"

"No. I didn't think of my sister at all. I don't see how it could have affected her, anyway, if the—if Marion hadn't died," said the young man, shifting his feet.

"No, that's true," said the chief constable, equal to the business once more. "That's very true. But, as things turned out, it was unfortunate. It made us think of your sister as a murderess, sir! A murderess! What do you think of that?"

"You see, Mr. French," said the inspector, "you resembling your sister to the extent you do, it seemed very possible that she might have come here early

on that Monday morning and planned the murder while trying to cover up her tracks."

"Yes, sir. But I didn't know anything about the murder when I jettisoned the side-car," said Mr. French. "In fact, it hadn't been done."

"No. But it puts you in a very awkward position, young fellow, you know," said the chief constable sternly. "It looks now as though *you* came here and planned the murder, and, by your own account, you had a good motive for it. Here you go and seduce a married woman and get her with a baby, and then sneak here on your motor-cycle and spy out the lie of the land, and go jettisoning—I think that was your word—side-cars, and so on—What does it look like, young man? Eh? What does it look like, I say!"

"I know, sir! But I've been unlucky, I swear! I never knew Marion was married. I met her at one of the concerts at Cissie's school, and she was always known as Miss Francis! How should I know that she was really Mrs. Waterbury? Nothing ever came up about that."

"How should he know that she was Mrs. Waterbury, sergeant?" said the chief constable suddenly turning round upon the sergeant, for he was a man who liked to believe that he encouraged his subordinates to think.

"Dunno, sir," replied the sergeant, saluting. He sat down, wiped his hands on his thighs and breathed heavily.

"Correct," said the chief constable, putting the sergeant's name down on the blotting paper and drawing a ring all round it. "Very well, Mr.

French. We accept that, as far as it goes. Now, about your peculiar behaviour. What *was* all that about the side-car ? ”

“ Well, sir, I wanted to see Marion. I had to make a sort of an explanation to her, and it wasn’t easy to do it at home—that is, at her flat, which she shared with another woman . . . ”

“ Oh, yes, orange trousers and her hair in a bun,” said the chief constable, who had been most interested in this description, which had appeared in brief form in the inspector’s report.

“ Yes, sir. So, hearing from my sister that they were to come down here for a fortnight with the children, I thought I might find an opportunity to tell her—to tell her——”

“ All about his wealthy fiancée, sir,” said the inspector, in answer to the chief constable’s glance.

“ Oh, yes, yes. His wealthy fiancée. The lady who, at all costs, mustn’t find out that in a month or two his baby would be born to another woman,” said the chief constable, in the manner of a Crummles drama. The young man flushed and swallowed, but had nothing to reply to Vincent Crummles. The little man seated beside the sergeant stirred again.

“ But I thought better of it,” said Mr. French after a pause which it seemed to him advisable to end, “ when I got down here.”

“ Why ? ” said the inspector suddenly.

“ I don’t know. It sounds crazy when you say it, but I think the hills got on my nerves.”

“ Does it sound crazy when he says it ? ” the chief constable brightly enquired. The inspector,

with an inward groan at this manifestation that his superior was about to run off the rails, replied tersely in the negative, and then said :

"What made you get rid of the side-car, Mr. French?"

"I had been going to suggest taking her out in it, and getting to some quiet spot where perhaps we could have a good talk. When I made up my mind I wouldn't, after all, be seeing her, I took the beastly thing off and chucked it away."

"A little drastic, Mr. French?" said the chief constable.

"I felt like it," said the young man, a trifle sulkily. "It was a sort of symbol."

"I see. You'd done with her for ever, you were going to let her have this baby of yours, and you were going off, carefree and singing, on your solo motor-cycle to marry this wealthy woman," said the chief constable, who, obviously, was living out of his period.

"Well, not exactly that, sir, but——"

"What about changing the number plates?" said the inspector. ('Laugh that off,' said his tone.)

"I didn't change the number plates," protested the witness miserably.

"Didn't he change the number plates, Jervis?" the chief constable enquired.

"Well, we'd better set the question aside, perhaps, sir, as we've nothing really against him on *that* score," replied the inspector. "It *may* have been a bit of romancing on the part of Tom Kiddons," he added.

"But I thought the Boy Scouts——?"

"No, sir. They merely noticed the address of the letters, and that he had no puncture."

"Yes, I see. Now, young man, we come to a more important point: What did you do when you got to the *Rose and Thorn*?"

This time the witness went pale, and did not answer.

"Come, Mr. French," said the inspector sharply. "You heard what was said. What did you do when you got to the *Rose and Thorn*?"

"But I—I didn't do anything! I hardly went into the village. You see, I got lost on the hills and had to ask the way, because I'm not much of a map-reader. But I swear I didn't do anything at the *Rose and Thorn*. I didn't even go inside. I didn't——" he looked round the room as though sizing up the chances of escape—"I didn't even know they were going to the *Rose and Thorn*."

"You didn't?" said the chief constable indifferently, but giving the inspector a remarkably sharp glance which was not lost upon the unfortunate Mr. French, but could not be seen by the sergeant. "Oh, well, of course, if you didn't, you didn't, and that disposes of that. He could scarcely have committed the murder, do you think, inspector, if he did not even know that they were going to the *Rose and Thorn*?"

"Scarcely, sir, I should imagine," said the inspector, apparently taking no notice of the glance. "That lets him out, I should fancy, and lucky, too."

Suddenly there was a cry from the anxious little man beside the sergeant.

"But he did know, inspector! He must have known! Why, I knew that myself!"

The chief constable slowly turned round.

"Oh, you did, did you?" he said. "That's what we wanted to find out."

(2)

"With a strong recommendation to mercy, as it is the opinion of the jury that he acted under extreme provocation. . . ."

(3)

"I was always fond of Marion, in my own way," said Mr. Waterbury, "and it wasn't my fault we quarrelled. She was a teacher, used to her own way, I suppose. . . . And, of course, I couldn't keep her. That was one rub; and we never had a child . . . that was the other.

"Marion used to think she was the only one who suffered, but she was wrong. I didn't like not being able to keep her, and I wanted the child as much as she did.

"Well, we didn't hit it off, and then I lost my position in the shipping firm, and she turned me out. Said she was going to sell the house—it was bought with her money, I'll admit. We started it on a mortgage, her putting down the two hundred pounds to begin with, and the arrangement was we would pay the instalments alternately, her one month and me the next. But I couldn't keep up, so she paid me back the money I'd put in, and that was why she could sell the house over my head

and I couldn't complain, especially as she'd had everything in her name.

"Well, I can't complain here, either. I've got free board and lodging here, haven't I? Will they really keep me here for twenty years?"

"No, so long as you aren't any trouble," said the prison chaplain kindly.

"They might just as well, though, looked at in another way," said Mr. Waterbury, "for I don't know what I can do, I am sure, when they let me out."

The chaplain made some reassuring promises, but the prisoner took very little notice.

"I went to see Marion once or twice," he said. "She lived in a flat with a friend, and I found she had gone back to using her maiden name. I'm not a proud man, but that struck me all of a heap. I asked her why she had done it, and she said it was when she went back into the teaching. While we were married, you see, she'd gone into an office and used her married name. But it seems they don't like married people as teachers, unless they are widows or just doing temporary work, and when she left the profession she hadn't said anything about marriage. I found out afterwards—that was during one of our quarrels, before we parted—she wasn't too proud of owning me for her fiancé, so she hadn't told the others anything, and she moved to London, anyway, so there wasn't anything in that.

"She got back into teaching easy enough, just right at the end of the war. Got a good London job, and took this flat with this friend, and settled down.

"She never refused to see me when I called, and was good at lending me money. I've been very unfortunate, you see. All she wanted was for me to leave her alone, and that I didn't mind doing, for I hated the sight of her by that time.

"Then I got to hear about the baby. That upset me, though I don't know why it should. I didn't know who the father might be; I didn't particularly care. I only knew I wanted to kill her before the baby was born. And why that was I don't know. It was just what they call an impulse, and that wasn't like me, either. I've always been very steady and rather timid.

"Well, it had to be all worked out. I was clever about that. I still don't rightly see, not even after hearing the evidence, how the inspector came to fasten on me, except that I lost my nerve, and came to him and let him know who I was. I thought if I didn't that ginger woman—Miss French—would pull me into it, and that might look rather bad if I hadn't shown up voluntarily before. We met once, when she came to tea at the flat, although I don't think she and Marion were any particular friends, and she certainly didn't know (at least, she wasn't told) that I was the husband. But she's smart, that woman, and I expect she guessed.

"Well, I went to visit Marion about a month ago, and I heard about this holiday with the children.

" 'And thanks to you, I'll have to go,' she said. 'Same as I have to do everything I'm told at this school. The head's got the nose of a third-degree American policeman,' she said, 'and she knows there's a secret in my life.'

"I told her it was just her fancy, all that, but the head would have been a prize fool if she hadn't known Marion was going to have a baby. Still, I said nothing about that, ever, because I couldn't trust myself.

"Well, in conversation it came up that they were coming to that place, Low Abbots, so I looked it out on the big map in the reference department at the library, and asked her, casual, where she was going to stop. She didn't know, but she did know the day they were going and she did know the time of the train.

"Well, the day before, on the Sunday, I went to see her again.

" 'I've got a job in a place called New Abbots,' I said. 'Would that be near where you are going?'

" 'Ycs, that it is. It's the very next place,' she said. 'Now, Enoch (such is my name, as no doubt you heard in court)——'

"I wasn't in court," said the chaplain.

"No? You didn't miss much. 'Now, Enoch,' she says, 'job or no job, you don't attempt to see me or meet me or borrow from me by letter, even,' she says. 'If you want to know, I shall be in lodgings down there, just where I don't yet know. But I don't want you poking about. You stay in New Abbots, if that's where your job is,' she says, 'although I don't believe you've got a job at all.'

" 'All right, Marion,' I said. 'No need for you to worry. I haven't done anything yet that you wouldn't like.'

" 'No, and you'd better not, if you want to go on getting my money for nothing!' she answers,

very quick. She was not a kind woman at all. People seldom are kind to the really unfortunate like me. It's not that I've ever been a bad man. I'm just unfortunate, that's all."

"And the most unfortunate thing you've ever done is this terrible business, for which, now, you're heartily sorry," said the young clergyman.

"Oh, but I'm not sorry at all," said the little man eagerly and anxiously. "I'm not a bit sorry for any of it. I've done something important at last. I've asserted myself. I'm very pleased about it, chaplain. I've done a deed which no one, not even God, can alter. I think my appeal will fail, but I don't even mind about that, as long as they're not going to hang me. I haven't much physical courage. I shouldn't have liked being hanged. But I never thought about that side at all when I did it, and I never did anything so interesting in my life as when I was planning it all.

"I even went down on their train. It was full of holiday-makers, and the one difficulty I could foresee was getting off the train without being noticed by all the people with Marion. The majority of the people, you see, were going on farther, to the sea, and I thought that nobody, probably, except the children and their escorts, would be getting out at New Abbots.

"Marion, of course, would not be surprised to see me, but *her* seeing me wouldn't matter afterwards, whereas if that sharp-eyed ginger woman saw me and remembered me as the man she'd talked greyhound racing with that day in Marion's flat, I knew that I'd never get away with it.

"Of course, I could have gone on another train, although hardly any stop at that station, but I didn't want to lose track of Marion, you see. It would never have done for people to remember, after the murder, a man who had made some enquiries about Miss Francis.

"One very clever thing I'd done, and I don't know to this day how that inspector saw through it.

"I read in the paper, a week before Marion—before it happened—that a man of my name, Waterbury, had got fourteen days without the option for hitting a policeman, and, funny enough, as I was touting about down Marlborough Street next day, a young reporter I know—I'd tipped him off about bits of news in return for a bob or two sometimes—says to me: 'I'm ashamed of you, Waterbury,' he says. 'Why aren't you in the jug? How did you slip them?' he says, and gives me a whack on the back, and laughs like anything.

"'Was he like me, Mr. Sandys? I saw it in the papers,' I says. 'My oath, I hope none of my respectable friends and business partners should think it was me,' I says. 'But there, I daresay he'd not be very much like me to look at, would he?'

"'Stockier, perhaps,' he answers, 'but not taller. And about your colouring,' he says. 'Of course, put the two of you together, and nobody would ever be mistaken, but if I had to give a description,' he says, and pats me on the back and goes off laughing.

"Well, the funny part about it was that I don't believe, up to that point, I'd really made up my mind, but I saw, or thought I saw—and I still

don't see why it didn't work—the alibi of a lifetime if I'd only got the cheek to use it. I turned it all over in my mind, and I couldn't see a flaw in it at all. After all, it wasn't as if I was going to kill her in London. There need be no more connection between me and this other Waterbury than just to let nosey-parkers think that I had been safely locked up when the murder took place. Easy as kiss your hand and a sight more sensible."

The chaplain looked sorrowfully at the now bombastic little man, and took out his watch.

"Now don't hurry me on," said the prisoner, becoming anxious again. "You're supposed to hear my confession, if so be I choose to make it."

"But you're not confessing, you're boasting. I can't listen to that," said the clergyman. "And you're not repentant, and that is a very sad thing."

"You listen. That's what you're paid for," said the prisoner. "I kept turning over in my mind how to get off that train without being spotted, and at last I began to have the glim of an idea. Then I had wind up because somebody pulled the communication cord and I got some notion the cat was out of the bag and someone had found out what I was going to do and was trying to stop me before I got to New Abbots."

"Then I could see that that was silly. I hadn't done anything wrong, and no one could prove I meant to. I spent the rest of the journey working out my little plan for getting out at New Abbots. We stopped again for about twenty minutes to change engines, and then I knew it was very little farther."

"I left my place in the train and walked along the

corridor until I came to the children's part of the train. I knew enough about teachers"—he smiled—"to feel sure that my wife and her companions would have seen to it that every child had visited the lavatory before the train approached the station at New Abbots, so I could be fairly sure that, five minutes from the end of my journey, the coast would be clear.

"I entered the lavatory compartment in the carriage on my own side of the dividing line between the children's carriage and the rest of the train, and there took off my coat and pulled on a little black beret instead of my felt hat. I pushed the coat and hat into a corner, came out as soon as the train stopped, and was fortunate to meet nobody.

"The porters came and opened the doors for the children, and I stepped into the corridor, unfastened the door nearest where I was standing, and began to hand out children and their luggage. Then, heaving up a sizable kit-bag, the property of one of the Girl Guides, and balancing it on my shoulder, I made my way out of the station, my face hidden on the train side, and got to the barrier and passed out. Seeing me with the kit-bag, nobody asked any questions. I gave up my ticket and noticed that the Guides were immediately behind me, forming up.

"That was another bit of luck. Their leader, an elderly woman, very fussy, I knew did not know me. The girl took her kit-bag and thanked me, I stood back inside the booking hall of the station—you know these country stations, how dark they can be—and the whole push, kids and teachers, just filed out past me without a glance in my direction.

"It was easy enough after that. I soon heard, from the people whose cars were lined up at the station kerb, the name of the hall in Low Abbots to which they were driving the children, waited until everyone else had gone, and then took a bus, checked up on the hall, then went to a pub and had tea. Nobody took any notice of the fact that I hadn't a coat. I had my beret, my flannel trousers and a half-sleeve shirt, and looked pretty much like a hiker, I should imagine. It wasn't really cold.

"Then I tucked myself away in the alley that led from the hall to the road, and was ready to follow whenever my wife came out.

"Of course, I had the bother of following them to the second hall, but the rest was a gift. I heard the conversation about the best place to stay for the night, heard them decide on the *Rose and Thorn* inn, heard the young teacher speak to the cabby, and simply hung on behind when they'd taken their seats. There was nothing to it at all.

"I dropped off when they got to the inn. There was plenty of time, for my purpose. It was just a break for me that it should be a pub they'd chosen, where anyone has the right to walk in and order a drink.

"I chose the public bar, because I was pretty sure that, with three bars going, the landlord wouldn't spend all his time in the public. He even went off and had a crack with the women. The coast seemed fairly clear. The place was all put about to get these women their supper, and it wasn't difficult to nip upstairs and hide under one of the beds. I thought I had picked an unoccupied room. It

wasn't until a bit later I realised that I hadn't, but even that didn't matter, although the elderly woman suspected I was there. I nipped out while she'd gone out to get assistance, and crawled under the bed next door. Taking a chance, you might say, but I felt my luck was in, and so it was, for nobody thought of looking in the room where I was. Elderly ladies have these little ideas of men under every bed, and I don't think the old chap who came along to help search took her seriously.

"The women were pretty noisy coming up to bed. I soon tracked down my wife. Then I had another bit of luck. I was crouching behind a large wardrobe out on the landing, when, at midnight, out came the ginger woman, naked as she was born, obviously off on a toot. So I slipped inside, for I had not heard the door close, so I knew she couldn't have locked it, and quietly got on to her bed.

"My wife muttered something about, 'I thought you'd gone out. Good night,' and I didn't even trouble to answer. I could tell by her voice she'd had too much to drink and wasn't bothering much about anything or anybody, but wanted to get off to sleep.

"I didn't dare wait too long. At about half-past twelve I did it, trusting to luck, and to the awful coughing of some old chap in a bedroom near at hand, to cover any noise I might make.

"It was easy——"

"Don't tell me," said the chaplain.

"It was easy," the little man repeated. "I think the pillow was enough, but I clutched her neck afterwards and dug my knuckles into her windpipe

to make sure. I knew what to do ; I had planned it so carefully the very last time I had seen her.

"I hadn't shut the door when I came in. Still leaving it slightly ajar, I slipped out, and had an hour or two of sleep behind the wardrobe. At five o'clock in the morning I went downstairs, stepping just like a cat, and hanging on tight to the banisters because of those brass-bound treads.

"The saloon-bar door had a curtain. I'd seen that the previous night. I hid there until they opened up in the morning. Then—I just walked out.

"Now, tell me, chaplain, how did the inspector break up that alibi of mine ? He seemed to take it big when I handed that out. What do you think put him on to me ? Did he happen to say ? "

"He said," replied the chaplain very slowly, "that you weren't the type of man to hit a policeman."